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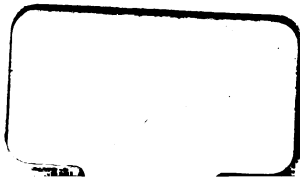
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A NOVEL.

BY
MARY CECIL HAY,

AUTHOR OF "OLD MYDDELTON'S MONEY;" "THE SQUIRE'S LEGACY;" "VICTOR AND
VANQUISHED;" "HIDDEN PERILS;" "NORA'S LOVE TEST;" "A SHADOW
ON THE THRESHOLD;" "BACK TO THE OLD HOME;" ETC.

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The Arundel Motto.

CHAPTER I.

HESSIE.

THE schoolroom at Lorne House was neat and silent, as it never was except on holiday afternoons; but it was not entirely depopulated even to-day, for on a high chair, at a safe distance from the window, was perched one little solitary figure.

A stiff and chilly room it was. The only glimpse of beauty it contained was the little face which peeped wistfully out among the bare branches of the dreary laburnum, in the sombre London gardens. The only glimpses of romance were the quick, wayward thoughts which chased each other in the fanciful little head bending now and then with sudden resolution over an open book. But a real picture did the childish figure make, in spite of the puzzled frown that puckered the low forehead, where the soft brown hair (that fell behind in long, rich curls) lay short and unparted.

"Well, Hessie, in punishment as usual?"

The door had been opened stealthily, and a girl of fifteen, short and plump, with cold, light eyes and fair hair, peeped into the room.

"The teachers know whether I'm in punishment as usual, and it doesn't matter to the girls," said the child, hotly, raising a pair of angry eyes from her book.

"A nice way to speak of your seniors and superiors. The *girls*, indeed!" sneered Bella Lane. "The Pet gets a shocking number of punishments, considering what a pet it is. But

I suppose it likes them, because its dear schoolmistress gives them. Eh?"

"I hate punishments," answered the child, her face full of defiance, "but I hate you more, Bella Lane. Go away."

"Oh, dear, dear," laughed Bella, with a shrug of her shoulders. "The Pet in private uses strong language, which Miss Berrington would weep to hear. Is it coming with us this afternoon?"

"If I know this," Hester answered, going back to her book quickly at the thought.

"Unless another punishment comes in the way, and Miss Berrington thinks dissipation would be bad for the Pet. She says you are much too keen after your pleasures, Hessie."

"She didn't say that to *you*, Bella," cried the child, with a tremulous eagerness, half angry, half pleading.

"I heard," smiled Bella, in enjoyment of the scene; "you will not like her quite so well now, will you, dear?"

"If she said it, it is true; but she didn't mean you to tell me, and you are a sly, bad, wicked hypocrite."

"What pretty words the Pet picks up! Does she learn them from her hero brother?"

"Take care how you talk about my only brother," said the child, a sudden brilliant flush rising in her face. "Oh! go away, Bella. You make me bad and angry."

"Don't hurry over your task, dear," laughed Bella, retreating slowly; "Madame Tussaud will not be gone if you have to wait for another Saturday, and we shall not cry ourselves quite ill if you don't come."

Left alone once more, Hester forgot her book entirely, and looked out afar through the little twigs of the laburnum to the blue beyond, vaguely wondering what life would be if there were no dear, dear father and mother to go home to when the holidays came, and no grand young soldier brother to come home now and then like a flash of cheery light; vaguely wondering whether Bella's brother could love her, and how it would be to live always with Bella.

Though there were no birds among the leafless branches, and no voices in the cheerless room, to whisper how, in the life beyond that garden-gate (standing ajar even now!) this wonder would be set at rest; yet there grew an unwonted longing in the big, shadowed eyes; a puzzled sadness, which all vanished instantly, though, when the door was opened again, and a pretty, gentle-looking girl, of eighteen or nine-

teen, came into the room and laid her hand on the open book in Hester's lap.

"How is this, dear? In disgrace?"

"Yes, Pollie. I always am, as Bella says."

"What have you been doing now?"

"I forgot my practicing," said the child, penitently, "until the time was quite up."

"But how could that be? Did not mademoiselle send you to the piano?"

"Yes, but—but—I was trying to make a tune to go to the 'Charge of the Light Brigade,' and fancying Arthur had been there, and picturing him; and I forgot until Bella Lane and Lydia Dyott came in to sing their duet, and they laughed and went away and told Miss Berrington, and—of course she punished me."

"Of course, dear," said the young teacher, with a little laugh herself, too, as she looked lovingly into the earnest upturned face. "She could not do otherwise. Have you a long lesson?"

"No; but it is harder than I thought it would be."

"Or are you wandering in your thoughts to-day, little one? Where is the long memory of which I am so jealous?"

"I think I can only remember pleasant things, Pollie," said the child, gravely.

"Because you have never had anything else to remember, dear, and never will have, I hope. Unpleasant things are best forgotten."

"Yes," said the child, dreamily, leaning her little head against Miss Goldsmith's arm, in happy ignorance of with how sore a pang this truth would one day pierce her.

"Is it hard, dear, what you have to learn?"

"No, not at all. It is Cœur de Lion's death, and I hate to hear about his death. When he forgives Bertram, I forgive him everything wrong he has done, even to his father."

"Your forgiveness is soon won, dear."

"No, it isn't, Pollie," said the child, looking up with a passionate light in her beautiful eyes, her voice catching for a moment the eager resentment which, years afterward, she found it so hard to hide. "If I had been Berengaria I should *never* have forgiven Bertram—never. Perhaps it was for *her* sake he was put to death. Was it?"

"I fancy not," said the young teacher, whose knowledge of history was almost as limited as the little pupil's. "Richard

and Berengaria did not live happily together, you know, except just at first. Now learn what Mrs. Marknam tells you of it."

"Mrs. Markham must have been a very dull person to live with, Pollie."

"She was very clever," said Pollie, with a little unconscious sigh. "I wish I were as clever."

"I don't," replied Hester, folding her arms round the slight figure of the girl beside her. "Aren't you happy as you are? I shall try so hard to make you happy when I grow up."

Pollie Goldsmith—looking down so tenderly into the earnest eyes—read something there which, with those few simple words, came back to her one day in the years to come.

"Now I must go," she said, after a little pause.

"Pollie," whispered Hester, looking up with unshed tears in her eyes, "stoop and kiss me, or I shall be obliged to jump up to your neck, and I've promised not to stir."

Pollie bent and kissed the curved lips, whispering: "You must not forget, and call me *Pollie* before the others, dear. Remember, I am your teacher, dear."

"It is very hard to say Miss Goldsmith, when I love you so," replied the child, simply.

Pollie laughed as she turned away, but the laugh had left her lips when she entered the class-room, where the elder girls were clustered round the fire, chatting of how they were going to spend their half-holiday.

"I hope we shall not be kept waiting by that baby," remarked Bella Lane, turning to Miss Goldsmith as she came in, but not condescending to address her by name, or to name the "baby" of whom she spoke.

"What baby have we in this house, Miss Lane?"

"Hessie Bruce. You knew quite well who I meant."

"Your mamma invited her."

"I can't imagine why mamma invites her at all. I enjoy things more without her; don't you, Lydia?" asked Bella, petulantly, as she turned to a tall, plain, heavy-looking girl of sixteen who sat next her, and was Bella's "bosom friend," whatever may be the interpretation of that near connection.

"Very much better, dear," answered Lydia, readily acceding, as usual, to any idea of Bella's, but ignoring the first part of her speech, because she understood very well the reason of Mrs. Lane's patronage of Hester, having been perfectly

alive, during her last holidays, to the reports which coupled Mrs. Lane's name with that of Hester's handsome uncle, whose estate in Hertfordshire was not far from Lydia Dyott's own home.

"I suppose you have been helping Hessie with her punishment lesson, Miss Goldsmith?"

"No; she never needs help at her lessons."

"She does not do them, nevertheless. She did not play a note of what she ought to have played, all through her practicing-hour to-day."

"That lost hour will not signify," said Miss Goldsmith, quietly, as she opened her desk at the table behind the girls: "she plays so well for a child of nine, that she can afford to lose an occasional hour."

"She is more than nine," put in Bella, sharply.

"She is not ten, Miss Lane."

"She cannot play such pieces as Bella can," remarked Lydia, lazily.

"No," answered Pollie, without looking round, "nor is she quite of the same age. She may even attain that height of excellence in six years' time."

"Of course you admire her music, as well as everything else about her," said Bella, with a toss of her head. "Some people are so infatuated. I can't see anything in the child, for my part, to turn people's heads."

"She is a frank, brave, tender-hearted child," said Pollie, looking up for a moment from her writing, "with a great deal of inherent rebellion and sensitive pride, which only either sorrow or kindness can eradicate. If you elder ones were only kind to her, that would do her unheard-of good."

"Oh, yes, if we all fell down and worshiped her, it would quite convert her, I dare say!" returned Bella, coldly. "And we ought, I suppose, because her father is rich. I think you are wise to win her favor, Miss Goldsmith; for myself, I prefer choosing my friends unbiassed. Lydia, come and dress."

When the girls had left the room, Miss Goldsmith raised her head from the paper she was filling (for her mother to read, and kiss, and re-read), and, covering her face with her hands, let the tears flow on unchecked. It was so cold and cruel of those girls to speak to her as they did sometimes; those girls so nearly her own age, and yet so far removed from her. Teacher and scholar! In their paltry classification the two were far remote. So cold and heartless was it, to dwell

apart under this roof; a life, too, which was but a preparation together, a little farther on, in light of which this would seem but a moment's halting-place.

With her elbows on the page which told bright, cheerful, pleasant bits of school-life, and over which her mother's heart would rejoice and be glad, Pollie sobbed quietly, until the door burst open, and a glad little figure sprung up to her side.

"Pollie! I've said it. I never made a single mistake. It was all through your coming in to me. Look up."

But when Pollie, unthinkingly, looked up to say how glad she was, Hester saw the marks of tears, and laid a flushed cheek against hers.

"I know you are crying about me," she whispered, "because you had no trouble before. Pollie, Pollie," she added, breathlessly, "I always make the people who love me unhappy. I always do."

Taking the beautiful little face in her hands, Pollie looked far down into the clear, sweet eyes. "You always bring unhappiness to those who love you, do you, little one?" she asked, with a faint smile.

"Yes, always."

"Why?"

"Because they are good, and they get disappointed in me, and I hurt them; and it will always be the same—always."

"Take care it is not so," said Miss Goldsmith, with an earnestness which was almost prophetic, as she drew the child into her arms. "It will be so easy to you in a few years' time."

"What are you thinking of so—so sadly, Pollie?"

"This little face, dear," the young governess answered, kissing it gently, "and hoping that it will bring, not pain, but gladness ever, to those who love it. Now run away and dress."

CHAPTER II.

THE LAST GLIMPSE OF CHILDHOOD.

MRS. PALEY'S brougham stood at the door, when the three entered her house in Sussex Square, and Mrs. Lane was waiting in the hall, elegant and languid. Almost as young as Bella, she looked, in her brilliant mauve and rich white furs,

and with her placid unruffled face. She greeted her daughter and Lydia smilingly, but though she bent to kiss Hester's cold, bright cheek, the child knew perfectly well that there was no shade of warmth or tenderness in the kiss.

"Is grandma coming?" asked Bella, looking round.

"No, dear; she is out to-day. It is better, too; we shall have more room."

"Only grandma always buys us something at the Bazaar."

"Just in time! I've got off on purpose to come with you," called a boy's merry voice at the door. "Aren't you glad?"

"Tom! how you startle one," said Bella, as her brother (a school-boy some two or three years younger than herself) kissed her carelessly in passing.

"You are glad, I know, mamma," he laughed, depositing another kiss on his mother's smooth cheek, and turning rapidly to shake hands with Lydia.

"Yes, dear, of course I am. How well you look! Come here, Tom. This is Hessie Bruce, niece to the Mr. Bruce you knew when you were at Rebbington with me. This is my little boy, Hessie—not that he likes to be called little, though."

"He isn't very big," said Hester, looking quizzically at the boy's slight figure, as she put out her small gloved hand.

"You are not very big, either," said Tom, trying to return her look of easy curiosity, "but you are very pretty, so I don't mind. Hadn't you better kiss me?"

"No, thank you."

"Very well," said Tom, turning on his heel, with a smile of great superiority. "I don't care about it; when I want a kiss, I can take it."

"You will never do that," Hester answered, the gravity deepening, "because you are a gentleman, aren't you? though you are not a big one."

And Tom, though he laughed, remembered that speech, until the trouble came in which he proved it false.

It would have been a gayer little party inside the brougham, Hester thought, if there had been room for Tom; but the two elder girls and Mrs. Lane found amusement enough in discussing the fashions and their friends, while Hester looked out upon the passing faces in the busy, frosty streets.

"Hessie," whispered Bella, pushing her back as they walked through the rooms at Baker street, "I hope you are not going to be so absurdly eager here in public. Don't show

all the world that you never saw anything so wonderful as a wax-work."

"I couldn't show it, because I don't feel it," answered the child, the enjoyment dying out of her eyes: "almost everything I ever saw is more wonderful, but that needn't prevent my being surprised, because—I hadn't expected them to look so real, I think. Who is this?" she asked, turning to Tom, who followed her with his catalogue.

"Henry the Third—poor fellow," said Tom, who felt that a little of his judgment was very necessary to assist the child in forming her own.

"Is it? Oh! I don't call him 'poor fellow;' he broke his promises: and anybody could do anything with him, if they flattered him. Wasn't that the King?" asked Hester, growing vague.

"Yes, I expect that's the fellow you mean. He used to drink, too, if you are to believe some histories."

"Most kings did," laughed the child; "but I suppose you mean a little too much. What a horrible thing to think of! I think a tipsy man is as bad as a man who tries to kill himself," she added, with an odd little gesture of repugnance.

"You don't seem particularly to admire poor Henry's character," said Tom, laughing as he watched her; "but he has a beautiful face, hasn't he?"

"Do you know," she said, looking demurely from the boyish face beside her to the royal figure above, "that I think you will be like him when you grow up?"

"Thank you," laughed the boy, wondering why he felt so vexed at her speech. "Come along."

"Go into the Chamber of Horrors, if you wish it, children," said Mrs. Lane, "and I will wait for you here."

They passed in eagerly, but presently Hester crept back to her side, a shadow over the beautiful dark eyes.

"Why have you come back already?" Mrs. Lane asked, as the child sat motionless beside her.

"I'm frightened that that one murdered face will haunt me," she whispered, below her breath. "Oh! why don't people let each other die as God lets them?"

"Pooh! you need not think of it."

"I'm trying not," said the child, with a shudder, "but I seem as if I couldn't help it. How terrible it would be if any one I loved was to die like that—I mean not to die, but to be

killed. I think the thought of that face and the—the blood will haunt me. I wish I hadn't gone."

"Nonsense! Try to think of pleasanter things, my dear," added Mrs. Lane, more softly, as she gazed about her.

And the little child, as she sat silent there, tried to fix her eyes on something attractive enough to blot out the vivid remembrance of Marat's face. But she could not; the brilliance seemed to have left the rooms for her forever.

There were several shops to be visited on the way back, for Bella's stock of gloves and ribbons required replenishing, and the early winter twilight had filled the hall with gloomy shadows when they entered it again.

A young lady was waiting in the drawing-room to see Mrs. Lane, the servant said, as he opened the door. And while she went in, the young people lingered at the stove, chatting idly.

Suddenly Mrs. Lane came among them again, drew Hester to her side, and put on the hat the child had just thrown off. Her fingers trembled a little as she tied the strings under the heavy brown curls, but her voice was calm as usual.

"Do not be frightened, my dear; but you are going home. Your papa has sent for you, and Miss Goldsmith is here to take you."

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" gasped the child, turning suddenly to face her.

"Your mamma is ill, dear, but you must not be frightened; it may not be much. And your brother—— Stand still, my dear."

Miss Goldsmith, who had followed Mrs. Lane into the hall, felt her heart beat as she looked upon the group which in that one moment seemed photographed upon her mind. Mrs. Lane, in her long, rich dress, calm and incapable, helpless to soothe or sympathize. The two elder girls, in their fashionable costumes, looking with supercilious inquisitiveness into Miss Goldsmith's pale face. The handsome little school-boy, with his blue eyes full of pitying inquiry; and, above all, sad and dreary to Pollie, the little startled figure, in its short brown-velvet coat, the brown hat pushed on one side, and the glorious eyes all misty with bewilderment—until they caught sight of her! Then, in a minute, they were hidden on her shoulder.

"Take me home. Oh, Pollie, Pollie, please to take me home!"

Miss Lane raised her eyebrows on hearing the junior teacher addressed with such familiarity, and Miss Dyott answered by a shrug of her shoulders. But the signs were lost on every one else; and in the strange, sad hush that followed, Pollie Goldsmith and her weary little charge were driven through the lighted streets back to Lorne House.

There was no train until the night mail, and for the hour or two before it started Miss Berrington kept Hester with her in her own room; while Pollie tenderly packed every treasure her little favorite had gathered round her, packing away not a few with tears upon them.

The cab was at the door before Hester had spoken one word. Then she faltered, as Miss Berrington held her in her arms:

"Is—mamma—dead?"

"No, dear. Oh, no," she answered, relieved to hear the voice, even so faint and low.

"Is—Arthur—dead?"

"The message never said so, dear," answered Miss Berrington, trying to hide her face from the searching, wistful eyes. "Whatever sorrow may come, though, God will give our little one strength to bear it. And she must help her mother—with His help."

No words could have roused the child as these did. She rose and took the tea Miss Berrington, with swimming eyes, prepared for her; and then she said her sad good-byes.

"If I come back, I will try as hard as I can to be better. I will, indeed," she said, simply.

Miss Berrington was still hovering about her, wrapping her own great shawl round her, and soothing and comforting the little, breaking heart, when Bella and Lydia entered the house full of questions. Miss Berrington signed to Pollie to make haste. The other girls gave their quiet, tearful kisses, and went back to the class-room. Bella and Lydia hesitated. The child in the big gray shawl looked wistfully into their faces.

"I haven't ever liked you very much," the soft, childish voice whispered; "but please forgive me before I go, and ask God not to punish me any more."

They kissed her warmly, and in another minute she was lost to them in the wide, gloomy street.

"She will soon be back, Miss Berrington," said Bella, feeling that she ought to say something, as they turned in together after watching the cab out of sight.

But Miss Berrington did not trust herself to answer, and Lydia was quite right when she whispered her companion:

"She doesn't expect her to come back, that is pretty evident. Poor little thing! There was some good in her, after all."

And the big, tearless eyes, which Pollie watched in a nameless fear, looked from the lighted railway carriage out into the darkness of the winter night, trying to pierce the misty, shadowy future, which seemed so far away from that life of careless childhood, which she had left forever.

CHAPTER III.

HESTER'S VOW.

SEVEN years had passed since the mistress of Lorne House had watched the departure of her little favorite, when one morning, as she sat alone beside her cheerful fire, there came into her the little pupil of her thoughts.

"My own dear little pupil," she said, in a tremulous voice, while glad tears started to her eyes, "yet neither little nor my pupil now."

"How pleasant this is! Dear Miss Berrington, how pleasant it is to see you again!" said Hester, in the soft, musical voice of old, as she rose from the low, clinging attitude into which she had fallen beside her old governess, and put down her hat. "The room is just the same, and you are just the same; only *I* am changed, in the years and years since—since that time."

"Naturally, my dear," said Miss Berrington, stirring the fire and putting a low seat for Hester beside her own. "You left me a little child, and you come back to me a——"

"Don't hesitate, Miss Berrington," said Hester, smiling. "Were you going to say a hoyden?"

"Let me see before I can judge. Now you have taken off your hat, I can see better. Stand there a minute."

With the obedience of the child she had been when they parted, Hester stood opposite the grave, kind eyes, with a look half of laughter and half of tears.

Miss Berrington gazed long into the beautiful young face, which flushed shyly under her keen scrutiny, then turned to the fire again with an unconscious little smile.

"I don't look like a stranger to you, do I, Miss Berrington?" asked Hester, wistfully, as she slipped down on the rug and looked up into her eyes. "What shall I do to show you unmistakably the little Hessie of old, the naughty child to whom you were so very, very kind and good?"

"She is here, quite unmistakably," said the old lady, gently kissing the quivering lips, "and yet, let me have the curls again for a minute."

With a laugh Hester let down the masses of brown hair, the ends of which curled heavily and richly still; and Miss Berrington gave the childlike face another intent gaze, then stooped and left another lingering kiss upon it.

"Now go to the glass, and put it up again, dear," she said, wishing only for a quiet moment's thought.

There was something so inexpressibly winning about the girl's face that she really wanted a minute's pause from gazing at it, and wondering wherein the charm lay. It was not that the features were perfect, yet there was a very perfection of beauty in the changing expression of the small, bright face, and the glorious dark eyes.

"Will that do, Miss Berrington?" asked Hester, turning from the glass, and breaking in upon the old lady's long thought.

"Yes, that will do, dear. Now, sit here and tell me everything."

"May I have some breakfast, please?" asked Hester, lightly, though her eyes had saddened at the old lady's words. "We only came into town late last night, and we go on to Dover to-day; so, as papa is late in the mornings, I told him I should go out to breakfast to make the most of my time, you see."

"That was a kind plan, dear; but how careless I have been never to think of it!"

"It would not have been a very natural thought, Miss Berrington, that I had not breakfasted at eleven o'clock. May I have it in one of the schoolroom cups, please?"

Miss Berrington laughed as she gave the order.

"Breakfast for two in the schoolroom service."

And when it came, they took the meal together, making it last as long as possible, though they did little execution among the delicacies. As they talked, in an idle, loving, desultory way, they seemed to avoid, by tacit consent, everything relating to the past. But when the cloth was taken away, and

the chairs drawn again to the fire, Hester asked, laying her hand gently on Miss Berrington's:

"What did you ask me to tell you?"

"Tell me, dear—you know—just what you said you could not tell me in your letters."

"About—that time you mean?"

"Yes, dear."

"I don't know how," Hester answered, with the old childish simplicity, as she dropped her head a little, and looked into the glowing fire, her brows contracted as if she saw some painful picture there. "There is such a heavy cloud above that time, Miss Berrington, that I can hardly yet see how things were. I remember how the story was told me of my brother's falling into temptation, led by a wicked man who enticed him to the gaming houses, night after night, until his ruin was complete; how, leaving one of these dens of wickedness one night, penniless and not himself, mad under the pressure of debts that he could never pay, Arthur turned upon this villain and told him a bitter truth. Oh, you know the rest; how they quarreled and fought; and how this man, though he was a soldier and an Englishman (oh, what a disgrace to the nation and the army!), left him lying with a bullet through the rash, boyish heart, in a wood near Berlin. Oh, Miss Berrington! how can these things be done in God's bright, beautiful world? and how can we believe *he* orders them?"

"Never mind that question, little one," said Miss Berrington, unconsciously falling into the old manner of addressing the child.

"I remember," Hester went on, never moving her eyes, "the terrible change I found at home; the hush and darkness of the house; my father's stern and silent agony, and my mother's vain effort to bear up against this grief. I knew how fresh tidings came, day after day, of Arthur's debts; and why the old luxuries were given up, and the old servants dismissed. All this I knew and understood, child as I was, but nothing seemed to matter, because my heart seemed dying, as I watched my mother fading day by day. Oh! the agony of the feeling that I could not help her, that I could not keep her with me by all the strength and intensity of my love; could only cling to her with a wild hope that we might be so close together that God *could* not part us; and when he took her, he might *be obliged* to take me, too. It was a wicked,

cowardly prayer, I know, and He was too merciful to heed it. He left me to be a little help and comfort to one who mourns her with a deeper sorrow even than my own. We two have been always together since she left us, and very restless; never staying long in any one place, through all the six years. But now," Hester whispered, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, "he is weak and suffering himself, and we are on our way to Italy, to—to try if that will strengthen him. My dear, dear teacher, you have taught me so many things, teach me to be brave and patient in this pain of seeing my father suffer. Oh! isn't it worse than anything on earth to be helpless to prevent pain and suffering to one you love?"

"I can but pray for you, dear," said the old lady, softly kissing the trembling lips. "That I shall always do, as I have always done."

Hester was silent a long time, still gazing among the ruddy coals, and Miss Berrington did not disturb her. When she spoke at last, it was with a little start.

"I should have been just leaving you now, Miss Berrington—girls leave school about seventeen, don't they?—and I should have had all your lessons and your advice to help me. I might then, perhaps, have been more fit for the years before me, more brave to meet their trials; more humble to bear their blessings."

"How has your education been carried on, Hessie?" the old lady asked, with a little tremble in her voice.

"On a most curious principle," said Hester, trying to laugh. "I have had in my wanderings a few lessons here and there—here in dancing, perhaps; there in whist."

"I hope your music has not been neglected?"

"I have had a lesson now and then; but I don't play—oh, not like any of your pupils, of course, Miss Berrington; though I love it, if possible, better than ever. But—but in everything," said Hester, raising a pair of big, sad eyes, in which the tears were struggling, "I shall soon know how sadly deficient I am, when I mix with other girls—if ever I do."

"Does it depend at all on what the other girls are, dear?"

"Miss Berrington, please tell me about my old contemporaries. Miss Goldsmith never writes to me; why is it?"

"Her old fault, dear, I suppose; her keen, sensitive pride is to blame. She lives in Birmingham now, she and her mother, and an aunt. and they are as happy as possible to—

gether. It is one of the happiest little homes in Birmingham, I should say."

"They *must* be 'very happy," said the girl, with a little sigh.

"They are not living as Mrs. Goldsmith has been used to live," continued the old lady, quietly, "but they never regret that. Pollie is not obliged to teach, but they are fond of giving, and would sooner work to earn money than not have it to give."

"I should so like to see her," said Hester, thoughtfully; "some day, perhaps, I shall. I wish you would persuade her to write to me, Miss Berrington. I wish you would tell her what good her one letter did me; tell her her letters would come to me like her own gentle voice, and help me now in my ignorance and unrest, as that used to help me when I was a little child—not a bit more weak and wavering and needing help than I am now. Would you tell her that? And what of my other school-fellows?"

"You should tell *me* of some of them," answered Miss Berrington, with a smile. "Bella Lane, for instance, is your cousin now, and Lydia Dyott a kind of connection. Have you seen either of them since your uncle's marriage?"

"Neither. I have not seen them since I left here. I was so astonished about Uncle Alfred's marriage! When we met a Hertfordshire gentleman in Paris, and he was talking of it, he told papa Mrs. Lane made a dead-set at Uncle Alf. I remember puzzling over that, until I decided she had performed some lugubrious quadrille for his sole benefit, and that he had been so charmed that he married her—instead of offering her half his kingdom. Oh, what a long, long time ago that seems! My little twin cousins must be five years old now."

"I have never seen Miss Lane since she left me," said Miss Berrington. "Yet she is often here. You know her grandmother lives in Sussex Square, when she is not with her daughter, or with the Dyotts at Rebbington. Lydia and Bella are greater friends than ever, now that they live within a drive of each other."

"I suppose I shall see something of them when we come home again," said Hester, with no very great gladness in the thought. "I wonder how Bella likes Churleigh?"

"Very much, I should think," laughed Miss Berrington. "Churleigh is a beautiful place, isn't it?"

"Yes. I can just remember it; but it was never like—"

Tell me of the other girls, please," concluded Hester, with a little sigh.

So long a talk it was about those old times that the clocks were striking three, when Hester, having returned and re-packed, entered their private room at the Great Western, and saw the early dinner laid.

Her father stood at the window, with the *Times* in his hand; but, though he held the paper, he was looking down into the street.

"Papa," said Hester, standing beside him, with unspeakable fear, as she noticed the angry and bewildered look in his eyes, "has anything happened while I have been away?"

She had lived with him nearly seventeen years, but only once had seen this expression on his face before. She had been his dearest friend and only companion for more than seven of these years, yet never before had he looked down upon her with such doubt and pain.

"Yes," he said, hoarsely, "but you cannot understand."

"Tell me, dear," she whispered; "I shall understand."

He turned from the window, and laid the paper upon the table.

"Read that, Hessie."

Bending very low over the columns, that her face might tell no tales, she read a paragraph which told the world that the Earl of Leaholme, having died suddenly a few days after his son, the title and the estates passed, in default of direct heirs male, to his nephew, Captain Douglas Arundel, of the Forty-first Regiment. The lines swam before her eyes, and the misery of her life all flooded back upon her, as she read the name which had never been mentioned by father or child since one certain night seven years ago, when it was muttered to her intense loathing.

Glancing into her father's stern, white face, the words she wished to say died on her lips. There was a long pause before she could speak indifferently.

"Did you know this poor Lord Leaholme who has died so sadly, papa?"

"The late earl! No, I never saw him."

His quiet voice had such a trembling pain in it, that Hester grew frightened.

"Papa," she said, forgetting everything in her fear for him, "you surely would not grieve that a wicked man has

come into this property? That is not worth a thought of ours."

"It is not that which grieves me, darling," he answered, steadying his voice by a great effort. "If I cannot *understand*, I do not *question* God's justice in sending all this wealth to him who took so much from us, and giving him a noble name, which has been borne for years by brave and upright men. If it had been any other title, I would have read it merely with indifference. I ought not to hesitate to speak to you of my fear, but I always do. I would so willingly, if I could, keep all painful thoughts from you, my darling—my only child. But surely you must know it now; must see yourself how short a time I can be spared to you. My days, my very hours seem numbered now, and though I often long to be at rest, the pain of leaving you swallows up every other thought. Oh, my little girl, so closely wrapped about my heart! that we shall have to leave you on the very threshold of your life—fatherless and motherless."

"Neither fatherless nor motherless in my heart, dear," said Hester, softly, as she clung to him, and tried to raise a calm, bright face to his. "I shall have your guidance, just the same."

The tears gathered slowly in her father's eyes, and she was glad to see them. Even they were better than that stern, white agony. He kissed her many times, then roused himself, and spoke hastily, with a tremble in his voice.

"There is but one home for you, my child, afterward—hush! you said you would listen—that is with your Uncle Alfred at Churleigh. He will be very kind and tender to my orphan child; and, though I do not know his wife, I feel he must have chosen one who will be a mother to the motherless. Her daughter, too, will surely be more of a companion for you than your own little twin cousins can be, and make the life pleasanter. I can only pray for your happiness, my darling, and trust. But from to-day that will be harder, for Wye Abbey (one of the seats of the Earl of Leaholme) adjoins Churleigh, and Lord Leaholme will be your nearest neighbor. Hester, my dying prayer to you will be to hold him always in the horror I have done. Assure me of this even now."

"But this is so unnecessary, papa," said Hester, readily; "of course I must ever hate him as I hate him now, as I have ever done since I heard of him first when but a little child."

"I must have a promise from you that you will do this."

"Dear father," she whispered, laying her hands on his, and looking up into his eyes, "I shall never be able to forget what he has done. I must always look upon him as my brother's murderer; as more—for that was my mother's life and yours afterward, and—oh, father! how could I do otherwise?"

"When I first read the notice," said Mr. Bruce, wearily. "I thought it possible there might have been two officers of the same name even in that one regiment; and while you were away I went and made inquiries. No—only one; the same man and bearing still the character he bore when Arthur joined the regiment and was warned against him."

"Papa," said Hester, feeling it would be best to speak of this now for the first and last time, "wasn't he obliged to leave the regiment, then? Would the gentlemen allow him to be their comrade still?"

"They never knew," he answered, in a voice of suppressed passion; "I knew it only by the letter Arthur sent. The servant my poor boy had then had been often bribed before by Arundel, and was bribed then. 'He had found his master that morning shot through the heart,' he said; and while the authorities looked round for a probable murderer, the real murderer left Berlin, easy and comfortable. I found Arthur alone there, the servant having followed the real master whom he had served. But the friends did their work of secrecy but ill, for they had not prevented my poor boy posting a letter to me the night before he fought, telling me everything."

"Then it was that letter which first told you, papa?" whispered Hester, her face white and stern like her father's.

"Yes; so I had hope with me on my journey, though so little. You may guess the cruel ending when they took me to my poor dear boy. And *he*, Hessie, *he*, the doer of this foul deed, has inherited a title and position which has been proudly and purely borne by the highest in the land. So true it is that God's ways are not our ways."

"Does Uncle Alf know he did this thing, papa?" asked Hester, after a pause.

"No, I told no one but—but your mother and yourself. You will judge whether he shall be told. Perhaps it is not for us to interfere if they are friends; but for yourself, my darling, you will remember how his hand is stained."

"Always—always."

"And this is a promise between us?"

"A promise, father."

Her father's bitterness of wrong Hester shared; her father's abhorrence of the man who had given them the one overpowering misery of their lives; but the father's anger was, after all, less deep and undying than that which burned in the girl's strong, ardent nature, as she looked upon the wreck which this misery had left.

CHAPTER IV.

ALONE.

DURING the two years which Hester and her father spent in Italy, Lord Leaholme's name was never mentioned by either. Both avoided it for various reasons, and as they hardly ever saw an English paper, the subject did not rise against their will when they were together—together always now, for Mr. Bruce was sinking fast, and Hester clung to him with a kind of double tenderness and pity. A tender care and pity for his weakness and pain, a tender care and pity for herself, in the consciousness that these were the last hours she could have him with her—him, the only one in all the world to whose heart she could cling—a pity to herself, which made her sorrow to leave him for a moment.

It was the last night, and he had been sleeping, while she, with her head bent upon her hands, prayed that this sleep might do him good. When she looked up at last, she saw his eyes fixed on her with a strange, yearning sadness in their depths. She bent with a kiss to catch his whispered words:

"Is Alfred come?"

"Not yet. He hardly could be here yet, dear."

"Then he will not be in time. Have you spoken to Colonel Platt?"

"Yes, this morning, father."

"And you will go with them, dearest?"

"Yes, I have said so," faltered Hester; "I shall not care where I go then."

"Hush! don't say that, my darling. I am glad to think you will be with them for a little time, before your new life begins. You will not be fit for the journey with Alf, nor to go into a new, strange home just yet. You are fond of Ella Platt?"

"Yes, I am *fond* of her, papa," said Hester, the low voice making unconscious emphasis, as if that fondness were a very distinct thing from the love with which her sad little heart was overflowing.

"And you will like to spend a year with them and go back when they go?" he asked, tenderly.

"Yes, papa, that will be when Ella marries, in a little less than a year's time—a year's time," she repeated, with unconscious pathos, as if the years were going to be very dreary ones.

"Hessie," her father whispered, gravely and tenderly, as he read her face, "if you are not happy in your new home, you will be in haste to leave it; and there is but one way in which you can do so; but oh, little girl, my darling little girl, do not let *that* influence you, or you will leave it for a real misery! Never marry for a home, my child. Marry only one to whom—through pain and misery—you can be true and faithful unto death. Remember that, my darling, as you are to remember one thing more."

He laid his hand softly on hers, and spoke a little clearer. "When they tell you you are beautiful, Hessie, my dear loved child, remember that the beauty is in the truthfulness and innocence and purity of the brave, sweet face. If those are gone, if the goodness is to fade from the young face that is watching me, better that it should lie here beside me, still and dead. Love, will you remember this?"

"Can I forget?" she cried, and hid her face. "Can I forget, dear father, that, or anything which you have told me?"

The night wore on in silence, and when the first faint streak of dawn crept softly in and lay upon the bed, the tired voice whispered: "I am better, darling."

At those few bright words, so-wearily spoken, the girl's brave heart gave way; the tension of the long night's agonized watch was broken; and Hester fell on her knees, sobbing pitifully.

"Is Alf come?"

She could not say the "No," and only shook her head.

"Darling, look up at me again. I have no pain now." The voice grew lower and more earnest. "Think tenderly of me, Hessie. Come nearer—nearer, love. My little girl—my only one. He will not leave thee, though I do. He will not—forsake thee. It is coming—so gently. And my Redeemer—waits to give—me rest."

So when the early sun flooded the room with its pure and heavenly light, he lay still and motionless in his last, most restful sleep.

Mr. Alfred Bruce arrived in Nice the morning after his brother's death, and that day he spent alone, sadly bowed down by his only brother's death, and the grief and disappointment of not having been in time to speak to him.

No trouble awaited him in consequence of his brother's will. Everything was left to Hester, and that everything amounted to but little, as the expenses of the last two years had been drawn entirely from the remnant of Mr. Bruce's fortune.

A letter from Mr. Bruce had told his brother of the arrangement that Hester should travel for some months with Colonel and Mrs. Platt, who were living abroad for the benefit of their own daughter, Ella, who, though a few years older than Hester, found it very much more difficult to acquire the language; and Mr. Bruce entered into the plan gladly; for he felt that the long watching and nursing, and the bitter sorrow which seemed so completely to have "entered her soul," would hardly fit her for her new home among strange faces. As for Hester herself, she dreaded the going-back, and she dreaded the going-on. In her silent grief, they could have done with her what they chose. So her uncle saw her off with doubt and anxiety, remembering that last visit to the lonely, sunny grave, where poor little Hester thought her own heart lay.

CHAPTER V.

EARL LEAHOLME.

LATE on one of the bleakest evenings of the early summer, Hester came to the end of the first journey she had ever taken alone; and waited beside her boxes on the platform of the dim lighted station which stood on the outskirts of the village of Ruyglen.

Her eyes followed the train almost wistfully, as it rolled away; then they came back slowly, and she followed the porter through the gloomy station yard, to where a servant in livery stood beside a waiting carriage.

"The master would have been here himself, ma'am, but he only returns from town by the night mail."

"Oh," said Hester, her heart falling a little as she heard it; "thank you."

In half an hour more she was to be at home. Would it be the home unattainable "'mid pleasures and palaces?" What should she do until she reached it? Sleep? Nothing was more thoroughly out of her power. Look out? That she did, but the gloomy blackness was not attractive, even though the carriage lamps threw weird little flashes on the indistinguishable landscape, like the quick Satanic smile of Mephistopheles in the opera. The horses made a slow turn, the coachman's voice called down "good-night," and Hester's heart beat more quickly, for she knew she was turning in at the lodge gates.

The wheels ran faster and more smoothly, then stopped, and Hester, half dazzled by the light which poured from the open hall-door, mounted the wide stone steps. As the servant closed the door behind her, a young lady came into the hall—a small girl, in gay evening costume, with light hair, very much waved and puffed. A pretty girl in her way, but the roses in her plump cheeks had too purple a tint, and her blue eyes were too cold and changeless.

"How do you do?" she said, holding out a warm hand and speaking as if this were a tiresome duty, and the sooner it were over the better. "Will you take tea or supper?"

Hester put her cold little hand in Bella's, and stooped to kiss her with a sensation of greater loneliness than she had yet known. Feeling how carelessly Bella turned her cheek for the kiss, she raised her face again rather proudly, saying, with utter weariness, "I should like to see a fire most of all."

With an odd little smile on her lips (Bella Lane never smiled except upon her lips), she told Hester to follow her; and throwing open the door through which she had come, she led Hester into a large, brilliantly lighted drawing-room.

"Hessie says that all she cares to see is fire, mamma," she said, with a titter, "so I brought her here."

Hester saw nothing distinctly, but she felt that a crowd of faces were turned to her, in surprise, and that one voice said something about the cold night. Standing where she was, and drawing her travelling-cloak round her, as if the sight of the thin, light dresses made it more welcome, she quietly begged pardon, and asked if she might go to her room.

When she reached it, she took upon herself to order a fire, and sat before it until it seemed to give her back more gloomy pictures of her coming life than she cared to see just yet, and

so she went to bed. And when their guests were gone, Mrs. Bruce and Bella came in, and kissed her with a cold good-night.

Surely the breakfast-bell! It woke Hester with a start, from her first sleep. She entered the breakfast-room slowly, wondering what would be her greeting.

A slight nod from Bella and Miss Dyott; a long, wondering gaze from two pairs of childish eyes; and a half-muttered "Miss Bruce," from the head of the table, in acknowledgment of which careless introduction Hester bowed but slightly, trying to hide the aching at her heart. She was just taking the seat to which Mrs. Bruce had motioned her, when her uncle entered—her dear father's brother. She met him with the great tears welling up behind her eyes, and raised her face for a kiss.

"Well, Hessie, here you are at last, then!" he said, laying his hand upon her head caressingly. "I began to think you had found another guardian. Let me look at you, now you are grown up. I can see nothing through such lashes. Those, at any rate, you inherited from your father. Something else, too, I can guess," he added, tenderly kissing her.

Then he sat down, and a few minutes afterward Hester fancied he had forgotten her very presence; as she fancied often, until she learned to know him better.

She was wondering how long it would take her to grow to feel at all at home among the different faces there, and who the two strangers could be on the other side of the table, when one spoke to her, in a pleasant, rich-toned voice.

"Allow me to thank you, Miss Bruce" (the name, though it had been so slurringly whispered, popped out in the most natural manner possible), "for rescuing me from a public reprimand."

"How have I done that?" asked Hester, in her frank, sweet voice, as she looked up at the speaker. Looked up to meet the half-searching, half-amused glance of a pair of grave, dark eyes which had yet a ready laughter in their depths; looked up for that quick, quizzical glance to fix forever in her memory a handsome, restless, intelligent face, browned by many climates; thick hair, with a rich, loose waviness in it, growing low on the broad forehead, and a rather proud yet laughing mouth, half hidden under the handsome, dark moustache. In her rapid thoughts Hester imagined that she saw a perfect English gentleman; and such a brave looking

English gentleman as she had never seen exactly opposite her before, in all her travels.

"The fact is," he said, readily, "my late appearance was just beginning to be a painful topic of discussion, when you appeared to the rescue. And I really had no excuse to offer. What is it, James? Oh, thank you! Where did I drop it?"

"In the study, my lord," said the butler, as he handed him a handsome signet-ring.

"Is that the ring which never can be lost?" asked Mr. Bruce.

"Yes. I have tried the experiment, you see, and it has failed. I never dropped it, though, before last night."

"Let me show it to grandmamma, will you?" asked Bella, reaching out her hand for the ring.

He gave it her, laughing. "It is no curiosity, Miss Lane. There is some tradition attached to it, I know, but I am hazy in the particulars."

"I see nothing but the armorial bearings of the Arundels," said Mrs. Paley, examining the ring through her glasses.

"And they are beautiful, aren't they?" asked Bella, looking over her shoulder. "What is this Latin motto, Lord Leatholme?"

The name struck Hester with so great a shock, that her very heart stood still, and a strong shuddering thrill ran through all her pulses. She hated herself for having looked at or spoken to him; and her lip curled with a contempt she could not hide.

"Will you look at the ring, Hester?" inquired Lydia, as it came round to her.

"I don't understand Latin," she answered, not offering to take it.

"You could read that easily," the pleasant voice said again. "It is only the Latin for, 'We win forgiveness by forgiving.'"

"We all know the Arundel motto very well," said Mr. Bruce, smiling; "and we all know how proud you Arundels are of the way you won it four hundred years ago."

"Are we?" asked the earl. "Do you think that is a legitimate sort of pride, Miss Bruce?"

"Perhaps," said Hester, coldly, "to those who can honorably wear such a motto."

"Hessie, you are fatigued after your journey, eh, dear?" asked her uncle, remarking the tone.

"No, thank you, uncle. It was hardly a journey from which to suffer after a night's rest."

"Hardly, if you are used to travel."

"Or like it," put in Lord Leaholme, "which is the case, I fancy."

"Are you a judge?" asked Hester, involuntarily.

"Yes, I think you have traveled a good deal, *and* that you like it."

"You have traveled a good deal, too," she said, carelessly.

"That is not half a judgment. Do I like it?"

"N—o, I think not."

"And may I ask how you can tell?"

"You look unsatisfied."

She regretted the words the moment they were uttered, and doubly so when she felt, rather than saw, Mrs. Bruce's glance. Her quick, impetuous answers were so ready, often to be bitterly repented of. Poor child! could her childish impulses, and pure, unsuspecting nature, guide her in her lamentable ignorance of the etiquette of this unfamiliar household? She who had not learned what etiquette meant, and whose acts and words had ever been so good and right in the eyes of her only companion.

"I beg your pardon," Hester said, looking down again, shyly, and meaning to address no one in particular, "but you asked."

"I did," said the earl, in a low, laughing voice, as his flashing eyes looked into hers, "and I thank you for the truthful answer. Next time I go abroad I will try to leave the unsatisfied expression behind me, on somebody's foreign visage."

"Such journeys as we take, you would just call staying at home, Lord Leaholme," said Bella, rather vaguely, "because you have been everywhere."

"Pray, hush! My shame will be increased tenfold if I have come home unsatisfied with *everywhere*."

"I should so like to travel, papa," put in Bella, insinuatingly.

"It is very tiresome," interposed Mrs. Paley, with great languor.

"Very," answered Leaholme, coolly, "as it always leaves such marks upon one's face that a strange pair of eyes can measure one's travels at a glance. Does there come a fresh wrinkle after every voyage, Miss Bruce?"

Hester blushed hotly, but took no heed of the question. Still, he did not turn his eyes away from her face.

"May I ask you to pass me my ring? On its way back to me, it has stopped beside you."

She pushed it slowly across the table, hardly touching it as she did so.

"Thank you," he said, looking curiously into her face still. "I would have come round for it, if I had guessed what a distasteful effort I was entreating you to make."

"Miss Lane," he went on, turning to Bella with quite a different tone, "how are we going to amuse ourselves this morning?"

Bella looked up eagerly. "Shall we ride—you and I and Lydia?"

"With pleasure. After luncheon, of course, you mean?"

And Hester, in her ignorance, wondered how that anticipated afternoon ride could be called their morning's amusement.

"Now, children, this is to be a holiday. Take Cousin Hester everywhere, and show her everything," said Mr. Bruce as he left the room.

There was an odd little silence in the room when the little boys had led Hester away, but Bella broke it presently.

"Hester is not much altered, mamma."

"She seems childish for her years, I think," said Mrs. Bruce, slowly, as she sweetened her mother the little after-dose of tea, over which Mrs. Paley generally dawdled for a quarter of an hour after the regular breakfast was finished.

"She used to seem a perfect baby at Miss Berrington's, I remember," put in Lydia, looking down into her lap, shy of the dark eyes beside her.

"Except for her mischievous temper," added Bella.

"A mischievous temper, had she?" asked Lord Leaholme, glancing down the columns of the *Times*.

"Yes, hadn't she, Lydia? She was in perpetual punishment at Lorne House," replied Bella, always hastening to answer any remark of his.

"A lorn establishment it must have been, indeed."

"We did not see much of her," resumed Bella, complacently; "she was at the bottom of the school and we at the top."

"She had no objection to imbibing knowledge, I presume," remarked the earl, with great abstraction.

"But, Bella, she was the youngest child in the school," put in Lydia, who was no match for her friend in diplomacy, and often popped in her speeches inopportunistly. "She was only nine when she was taken away."

"Just the age for a mischievous temper to assert itself," Lord Leaholme said, with a grave shake of his handsome head.

"Yes," answered Bella, readily; "and she never tried to win our love at all. I think she cared for nobody but a dull little English teacher."

"Depraved taste! What could such a person possess to recommend her to a lady of nine years' experience?"

"I do not know," she said, a little more slowly; "I never could see anything in her. But, Lydia, don't you hope Hester is not so keen after excitement as she used to be?"

"Pernicious tastes, as well as low ones, eh, Miss Lane?" observed Earl Leaholme, lounging over to the window. "Did the commander-in-chief allow such an inclination to be encouraged?"

"I think, myself, that Miss Berrington indulged her; yet I have heard her say Hester required a tight rein."

Standing at the window, Leaholme hummed lazily:

"He that would rear two daughters fair,
Must hold a steady bridle;
For here they skip, and there they slip,
And this and that way side?"

"I suppose that is an impromptu, Lord Leaholme," said Bella, standing opposite him.

"No. I have heard it somewhere, some time. Not at my grandmother's knee—which is the correct spot for picking up old rhymes—because I never possessed a grandmother of my own. You are more highly favored."

His eyes had wandered to where Mrs. Paley sat, sipping her tea, and talking quietly to Mrs. Lane.

"Yes," smiled Bella, "and she is so fond of me."

"Has your cousin a grandmother who is so fond of her?"

"My cousin? Who is my cousin? Do you mean Hessie? We are not cousins."

"I beg your pardon humbly. Has the young lady whom I presume to be in some faint and distant degree connected with your house—the young lady with the strong propensities for worldly dissipation—any other relatives in Herefordshire?"

"No," said Bella, feeling just a little at bay. "None anywhere."

"Poor little girl!"

"Why poor, Lord Leaholme? Of course she is going to live here always."

An odd little smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"I thought young ladies never looked forward to living in the paternal nest for 'always.'"

"Oh, you mean that they generally marry," she said, with a conscious little simper. "Hessie will live here always, then, unless she marries."

"But she may marry the heir," he said, looking into her eyes with a comical seriousness.

"Lord Leaholme, what will you say next? Fancy Hessie marrying Alf."

"I have read a capital account of a marriage, where there was more difference than that between the bride and bridegroom. A brave young fellow he was, and a noble dame was she; and an unlimited future of intense happiness they are supposed to have spent together."

"Did you know them?"

"Thoroughly, by the time I reached their third volume."

"Oh, Lord Leaholme! It is a book, then?"

"Yes. Do you not know it?"

"No—o, I think not," she answered. "Take care if you are going through, Lord Leaholme; your head is too tall for these windows."

She watched him as he sauntered off among the flower-beds, thinking how grandly strong was the tall, well-knit figure, yet how light and easy; but, strange to say, she did not, as usual, suddenly remember that she, too, was going that very way.

"Do you know, Lydia, even yet I do not quite understand him," she said, as Lydia came slowly up to the window.

But Lydia did not seem to think this very odd.

"I am rather glad," she said, smiling, "for it makes me seem less silly."

"You are a perfect little goose, Lyddy," said Bella, with a friendly slap on the shoulder that was on a level with her own ear; "you tremble before him yet."

"And always shall," answered Lydia, plaintively; "and I don't quite know what I shall do if—when you marry him."

"Oh, I will not let him frighten you, dear."

"But he does not frighten me now, only I cannot help always blundering in my answers. You cannot understand, because you are so self-possessed."

"It must be wretched to feel awkward," ruminated Bella, comfortably. "Lord Leaholme and I get on very well, don't we, Lydia?"

"I should think so, dear; you always try to go together."

"You mean he always goes with me," interrupted Bella, hastily; "yes, he does. Where is he going now, I wonder, loitering off there out of sight. I don't think, Lydia, that he is one to show himself very, very much in love, do you?"

"No, he does not show it very much," assented Lydia, readily.

"Bella," said her mother, as she rose from the table, "we have had a long discussion this morning, and grandmamma consents to come with us if we go to Aberswys this summer. Now you must try to prevail on Earl Leaholme to come, too."

"Oh, that would be glorious! Where are you going Lydia—to that everlasting practice of yours?"

"No, I am only going with Mrs. Paley."

As their steps died away, Bella stood opposite her mother, a rather unpleasant expression on her shallow face.

"What do you really think of Hessie? Will she be called—pretty?"

"Very probably, love; but there are as many various tastes in the world as various faces."

Bella performed a gay little dance up to the mirror, and pulled out the loops and twists and other machinery of her frizzy light hair, while Mrs. Bruce watched her.

"If Hessie behaves as she ought to behave, Bella, there is no reason why she should not be content and happy here; of course, I shall do all I can for her. But it must not be forgotten that you are her senior, and a daughter of the house."

Bella laughed, perhaps at the bare possibility of that fact being allowed to sink into oblivion.

"All right, mamma; you and I understand each other thoroughly."

And Bella tripped away. She was rather given to tripping, and starting, and clapping her small plump hands, and uttering exclamations of astonishment on the smallest provocation, as is the manner of some maidens.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WINNING MOVE.

HESTER spent a very merry morning with her little cousins, the three firmly establishing a friendship which was to last as long as life. Perhaps she was drawn more naturally to Wattie because he bore her father's name, and because his clinging gentleness won her tender, lonely heart. But she was more amused and enticed from sad thoughts by Alf's gay and thoroughly boyish words and ways.

Altogether they enjoyed the morning, but when the boys were summoned to their early dinner, Hester stood at the window in her own room, and let that bitter longing creep over her which so few of us have not known; the longing which we must feel when, on the dusty, toilsome road, we look around and feel our dear companions have left us there alone, without one heart to which we can cling with that dear, sweet claim which makes a *home*, and gives the word its widest, purest influence over us.

Poor Hester felt the burning tears start against her will. The loneliness was cold and hard to bear; yet, as she felt in a vague kind of way, there was something worse than the loneliness—some heavy shadow for her on the life that was just begun. A shadow of sin? Ah! could it be otherwise, she sobbed to herself, while *he* was there; while she must meet and speak to him, nursing this horror of him in her heart.

The tears spent themselves, and Hester, looking down to see the bright noonday sunlight playing among the summer leaves, said to herself:

"I will go out alone a little; it is very beautiful down there, and I must be calm and self-possessed before I meet them all again."

Taking up her hat, and tilting it low over her eyes to hide the marks of tears, she went slowly through the hall and out into the sunshine, where everything was bright and free. And Hester's thoughts regained their brightness and their freedom, as she sauntered on down the north avenue.

Her intense love for everything beautiful brought the old glad light on her face, and she actually caught herself singing softly—singing a favorite old air, which fitted into the

bright, calm beauty of the hour, and the sad, patient thoughts of her heart:

“There’s nae sorrow there, Jean,
There’s neither could nor care, Jean,
The day’s aye fair
I’ the land o’ the leal.”

She had stopped in her walk, leaning on the back of one of the seats placed among the trees, and looking off to where she could catch a glimpse of the river in the distance; and as she finished singing, a voice, which had startled her before, and which it was not easy to forget, broke the silence.

“When I came here idly seeking pleasure, Miss Bruce, I little thought, I should find it in a verse of that sweet old song.”

“I came here for pleasure, too, my lord.”

“Of course,” he answered, smiling at her impatient tone.

“Can you, too, find it here, I wonder?”

“Not now,” she said, very low, but very steadily.

“You may,” he answered, kindly. “You only seek relief from a lonely dread you have in looking forward.”

“You cannot tell.”

He laughed quietly.

“I do, indeed; I read it in your face. I read it there this morning; I read it there even last night.”

“Impossible,” she said, with a nervous attempt at a laugh herself.

“I read it now,” he went on, coolly, “as plainly as I read those words upon my ring.”

As she followed his eyes she saw that his hand was close to hers upon the rail of the seat, and with a quick, shuddering gesture, she drew hers away, remembering that her father had called it “the stained hand.”

He met her eyes, with an amused, confident light in his own, which doubly strengthened the passionate feeling of resistance which, from that moment, made her one aim in his presence to be to stand alone, apart from him in every way, with a steady, unwavering antagonism filling her heart.

“Return my confidence, Miss Bruce, and tell me what pleasure I came to seek.”

“I do not know,” she said, with cold, proud emphasis, though a passionate light came into her eyes; “do leave me to myself.”

“I will, for you are in earnest,” he said, keenly observing the

her face; but never seeing that the misery he saw there was caused by himself; by his being near her—he, of all the world—and no other friend. He turned away and she walked on, but not singing now.

A few minutes afterward she reached another seat among the trees, on which sat Bella, with her work in her hand. She looked round as Hester came up, then turned away carelessly.

“How bright and pleasant it is!” said Hester, standing at her side.

“Very. Have you been far down here?”

“I have come straight from the house.”

“Did you see Lydia?”

“No.”

“It is very quiet. One seldom meets any one here.”

“I have met some one, you see, on my first journey,” said Hester, smiling.

“Oh! me, you mean. But otherwise you would have met no one, I suppose.”

Hester, too busy in her thoughts to guess the motive of this question, answered lightly:

“I should, indeed. It is not five minutes since I met Lord Leaholme.”

Bella rose slowly, trying hard to hide the vexed expression on her face.

“I must go; it is nearly luncheon time,” she muttered.

Hester prepared to accompany her, but she stopped her.

“Do not shorten your walk; you will have time to go round, and home by the other avenue.”

So Hester went on her solitary walk, and enjoyed it very much until, on her homeward way, a sudden turn showed her Lord Leaholme and Bella strolling on before her. He heard the step behind, and turned on his heel and waited. Miss Lane waited, too, but with much surprise on her face; and they walked to the house together.

As Bella and Lydia mounted for their ride that afternoon, Hester stood on the terrace, talking lightly to the children, who hovered in keen delight round their new grown-up companion. The girls had not asked her to join them; yet—though she feared the tears starting every moment, with the longing she felt for a breezy, healthy canter between the sweet spring hedges—she stood, to all appearance, utterly and easily indifferent to it all.

“You do not ride, then, Miss Bruce?”

Lord Leaholme stood beside her, drawing on his gloves, as he asked the question aloud and pointedly.

"I do, sometimes," she answered, with a proud sadness in her voice.

"The Churleigh stables are not limited, I believe, Miss Lane?"

This question was a little more pointed still, as he turned to Bella.

"Certainly not. Hester can ride if she likes."

"And who would dislike it on such an afternoon as this?" he said, gently. "May I see about a horse?"

"What for?" asked Hester, turning a little defiant face to meet his.

"For you—you said you rode?"

"Yes, I rode once. I shall ride again, perhaps, some day."

"You decline to ride to-day?"

"Yes."

He bowed gravely, without answering; but as they rode off, and she turned away to have a race with the boys, he raised his hat, with a smile of amusement in his handsome dark eyes which she did not like.

When the ladies left the dining-room Wattie drew Hester into the conservatory, and there the two lingered together, while the child made a little bouquet, and arranged it in her black dress. Then the little fellow laughed and clapped his hands.

"Oh, Hessie, you *are* pretty and bright!"

And the involuntary criticism was a truer one, perhaps, than we have been able to give. Properly, more than beautiful, her face was essentially a pretty face—pretty in the truest meaning of the word; a face intensely bright and lovable, with its radiant, wistful, childlike eyes, and mouth so tender, yet so ready for a smile; a face that could not index a mind in which there lurked one shade of vanity or selfishness.

The luxuriant brown hair, brushed back on the temples, still kept its old wayward bend upon the smooth, wide forehead, and in its wealth crowned the dainty little head.

"Am I pretty, Wattie?" Hester asked, almost sadly. "How do you know?"

"Can't I see?" inquired the child, simply.

She lifted him in her arms, never heeding his cry to take care of the flowers, and kissed him two or three times.

"I would rather you had said it than any one else in the

world at this moment," she murmured, as she walked slowly into the drawing-room.

Bella was playing when she entered, and she went up to the piano and began turning over the loose music listlessly.

"You used to play that at school, I remember," she said, when Bella had finished.

"What do you mean by playing it at school?" retorted Bella, angrily. "Don't you see that this is all new music? I shall try some more of it presently."

With which glib little falsehood—which was not a falsehood to Bella, because the music itself was newly bought, if the notes had been learned years ago—she rose and left the piano.

A shadow that was more than disappointment fell on Hester's face as she sat down and began to play very quietly, as if to herself.

She had only just left off, and was standing at the window, wondering whether a retreat would be feasible, when Lord Leaholme joined Bella, who was sitting near her, and spoke rather low, but for her to hear.

"How strangely you have been playing! Where were your thoughts the while?"

"Not in the dining-room," she answered, looking up with a smile.

"No; I hardly expected it. That playing spoke of thoughts far more distant."

He said it with a grave seriousness, never raising his eyes. Bella rose rather hastily.

"Will you sing?" she asked. "Will you sing to me?"

"Is that an insinuation that no one else is supposed capable of undergoing it?"

"Mamma and grandma are napping," she whispered, "and papa is not come. Lydia, of course, is deep in her tatting. So, much as you dislike it, you must sing to me."

"I will," he answered, "though I ignore the existence of a *must*, having a firm conviction that my songs have strong somnolent tendencies, and would therefore be appreciated by the napping portion of my audience; also, that the excellent time I keep would simplify the arithmetic of Miss Dyott's tit-for-tatting. I will sing to you, Miss Lane, but—who is that in the shadow of the window-curtain? Miss Bruce, I declare! awake, too, and actually idle! I will sing to her next; that is her punishment for being neither asleep nor

tattling. Why do you laugh? Have I mistaken the word again?"

"There are a hundred songs there that you know, Lord Leachholme," said Bella, laughing, as she took her seat. "Which shall it be?"

He turned the music over lazily, making little comments as he put aside sheet after sheet.

"I do not like the key; this is so provokingly short that you will encore it. And that—let me see—the words are meaningless, and good musical words are as necessary in a song as good musical notes. No, that is too melancholy; if your eyes fill with tears you will not see to play, and so put me out. This is good, but I do not think you play it well, or you play it too well, or something. Ah! come, this will do. I will not detain you."

Bella laughed so heartily at this idea after the long delay, that she did not notice that he had taken out two songs, putting one open on the desk of the piano, and leaving the other under his hand.

"Now I am ready to sing to you, like a melancholy troubadour of old. Put a great deal of feeling into the accompaniment to help me."

Without being conscious of it, Hester had followed the words, and was prepared to hear a sad and plaintive song. She started in surprise as a rich, clear tenor voice began with a light gayety:

"We are a' noddin' nid, nid, noddin';
We are a' noddin' at our house at home."

"Thanks," said Bella, in a tone of suppressed mortification. "I just call it a desecration of a beautiful voice for you to sing those things. Now sing 'O tu, l'alma adora.'"

"With pleasure; but I said I would dedicate the second to Miss Bruce. Here is one. May I trouble you?"

With a quick, hurried movement, she turned over the leaves of the song he took from the others.

"I never saw this before."

"It is new, I believe. It was sent me with various others yesterday from the publisher. I brought it with me last night, but never felt inspired to sing it. I should like to do so now, if you have no objection."

Bella began rather heavily; for though she read music

without much hesitation, she read it without any expression at all.

"It is unjust to ask me to play it without ever having looked at it," she said, trying to speak gayly while she knit her brows over the effort.

"So it is. Perhaps Miss Bruce knows it. Miss Bruce, do you know 'My Queen?'"

"Yes," said Hester, quietly; "I have seen her twice; once in Scotland, once in Hyde Park."

"Which is, being interpreted, I must play my own accompaniment."

He sat down and played a symphony, looking quizzically, as he did so, at the darkening window, where Hester leaned her head against the glass, and gave herself up to the sweet, sad pleasure she always felt on hearing beautiful music. That this was the touch of a true musician, she felt at once; and when he began to sing Blumenthal's then new song, the words moved her strangely, in their earnestness and reality:

"Where and how shall I earliest meet her?
 What are the words she first will say?
 By what name shall I learn to greet her?
 I know not now, but 'twill come some day.
 With the self-same sunlight shining upon her,
 Streaming down on her ringlets' sheen,
 She is standing somewhere—she I would honor,
 She that I wait for, my queen.
 I will not dream of her tall and stately.
 She that I love may be fairy light;
 I will not say she would walk sedately,
 Whatever she does will surely be right;
 But she must be courteous, she must be holy,
 Pure in her spirit, that maiden I love;
 Whether her birth be noble or lowly,
 I care no more than the spirit above.
 And I'll give my heart to my lady's keeping,
 And ever her strength on mine shall lean;
 And the stars shall fall, and the angels be weeping,
 Ere I cease to love her, my queen."

There was hardly a minute's pause, and Lord Leaholme modulated into the song for which Bella had asked. As the rich notes and impassioned words died away, Hester felt she could have hidden her face and sobbed aloud. The darkness crept nearer and nearer to her from without, and the lights in the room shone out more and more cheerily. Still she stood there, quiet and motionless. James was closing the curtains over the other windows, and would reach hers soon.

"Is this strange, nameless pain, so hard to bear, my child?"

Leaholme's voice was so ineffably gentle, yet at its sound the pain grew keener, and she kept her face still turned away. It was well, perhaps, that Bella's eager glance should come between them, and bring back Hester's thoughts.

"I hope Hessie will play for us. Were you asking her?"

"Indeed I was not. I consider you and I have supplied sufficient music for one night."

But the few thoughtful words only filled Hester's heart with greater dread and hatred, seeing how he felt, and used, his power.

"Now that we are snugly shut in," said Bella, relieved, "let us have a game at chess, Lord Leaholme."

They all left the window as James came up to close it, and Bella went on, rather eagerly, to Hester:

"Would you like to look at this book? You are sure not to have seen it, as it is quite new."

Hester took the novel and sat down, very glad they were going to leave her in quietness. Lord Leaholme brought the chess-table near to where she sat, put Bella a seat close to Hester, sat down himself opposite, and began to arrange the pieces.

Hester did not notice the players at all, feeling not the slightest interest in the game; forgetting all else, and living, as she always did, among the characters of whom she read. Miss Lane's laugh at last broke the spell, and she looked up from her book to meet the steadfast gaze with which Lord Leaholme was regarding her. She turned her eyes carelessly away, and the color never rose in her cheeks; what he did, or said, or looked, was matter of such thorough indifference to her.

He read this, as he seemed to read all her thoughts, and he smiled as he addressed her with comic distress.

"Miss Lane has checkmated me for the first time within the memory of man. Can you imagine, Miss Bruce, how such a thing could have happened?"

"I am so glad I have done it at last," laughed Bella; "I have tried so often."

"I cannot understand my defeat. The fact is, I do not like to be conquered in a game like this. I begin to grow doubtful of myself, and that is by no means a pleasing sensation, is it, Miss Bruce?"

Hester did not wonder to hear the touch of earnestness in the gay voice.

"It must be, at all events, a novel one to you," she said, slowly, "if this is the first time you have felt it."

"I *have* a very novel sensation about it to-night. It has been a very equal game," he added, quickly, "but I suppose you have seen little of it."

"Not one move, my lord."

"Your book must be interesting. You are an indefatigable novel-reader, of course?"

Though he spoke of it as a matter of course, he looked surprised at her simple answer:

"Yes, I am an indefatigable novel-reader."

"It is there, perhaps, that you learn to—judge so severely."

"Perhaps so," she answered, carelessly. "I cannot read without learning something; sometimes a something of infinite worth to me; sometimes a something far better unlearned."

"You feel that, yet you read them all?"

"Not quite. I have courage to leave a book unread, if I feel it would be better for me to do so."

"Indeed! And does it require a great deal of courage—more, for instance, than is required to meet, with unconcern, the consciousness of standing alone in a cold, unloving atmosphere?"

She looked one moment into the handsome face which had grown so gentle as he spoke, then she bent to her reading again, with a defiant light in her eyes.

He leaned forward a little, and laid one hand upon her book.

"Believe me, it is not always safe to judge us by what you read of here. Sometimes you may be right, but it is so hard to know when."

She did not answer, and he turned to Bella.

"I should like, Miss Lane, to watch a game between you and Miss Bruce. Will you oblige me, and persuade her to do so? I long to see some one else defeated."

Hester laid down her book at once to take his place, and—little as she might have wished to play—she soon seemed to enter into the game with her whole heart.

"You are not a bit changed since you were at school," said Bella, coldly; "you were always so keen after any game or amusement."

"I had not much time for indulging in them," Hester answered, good-humoredly, "my spare time then being engrossed by punishments."

"You lived, then, in a state of chronic disgrace," said Leaholme, gravely, as he sat with his arms crossed on the back of a chair watching the game.

"That was exactly my youthful existence at Lorne House, was it not, Bella? How kindly Pollie Goldsmith used to help me. You remember Miss Goldsmith?"

"Yes, I remember her, I think—a quiet, dull little thing. You were the only one she favored with her friendship. Lydia and I were too honest for her."

"What do you mean?" asked Hester, her eyes flashing at the insinuation against her absent friend.

"I mean," said Bella, hesitating a little, "she was not kind to us; so we could not praise her and say she was."

"She *was* very kind to me, but she would not let me praise her and say she was," answered Hester, quietly. "It's your turn to move."

"You are an accomplished player, Miss Bruce," said the earl, apparently intent on the moves; "but your conduct requires caution, for you have a very determined antagonist to-night. Now, Miss Lane, take advantage of Fortune while she smiles; her wheel is turned before you imagine it. Ah! that was a diplomatic move. Did I not tell you, Miss Bruce, with what consummate skill you have to contend? I hardly know what you can do now, your fortifications are so scattered. Yes, that is the very move of moves. I forgot your outpost. Bravo! Now, Miss Lane, 'The thirty cities' warn you; look that your walls be strong."

As he went on, laughing, yet interested himself, Hester grew eager and excited over the game; Bella sitting opposite her, cool and collected, yet looked, as he had said, a very determined antagonist.

"Checkmate!" and Hester looked up, blushing.

"Are you quite sure?" asked Bella, as she made a clever move which Hester had overlooked.

Hester's face flushed bright as she met the earl's amused glance, and she moved rather nervously, laughing as she did so.

"You are losing wilfully now," he said, gravely, almost angrily. "It is no pleasure to watch a struggle from which the conqueror retires in the moment of conquest."

"Now allow me the pleasure of saying checkmate," said Bella, ecstatically. "You spoke a few minutes too soon, you see."

"And in the wrong person," continued Hester, at her ease again.

"You own yourself defeated, then?" asked Leaholme, rising as she did, "though you must own, too, that you might have conquered if you had chosen."

"Most humbly I own myself defeated."

"I hope you do not feel so uncomfortable under the circumstances as I did."

"The sensation is not at all unpleasant to me, nor is it novel," said Hester, frankly returning his searching gaze; "I should have no pleasure or excitement in any game if I felt at all sure beforehand how it would end."

"Should you not? I'm afraid I make up my mind to win."

"In every game?"

"In every game I care about. There is a saying that those who lose oftenest have the victory; but where we set our hearts, of course we like to win."

He spoke the last words so low that she hardly distinguished them. Yet they made her lips quiver as she bowed coldly and left the room, not sorry to find herself alone once more, that first day gone forever.

CHAPTER VII.

TOM'S RETURN.

HESTER's days passed on so uneventfully that it almost surprised her to find how rapidly the spring had blossomed into full, luxuriant summer. She had grown accustomed now to the cold, unloving companionship of Mrs. Bruce and Bella. Her uncle was always kind and gentle to her, but then she saw him so seldom: his mornings were spent entirely in his study: three hours a day he taught his little boys, and one or two more he spent in his favorite scientific occupations. The afternoons he generally devoted to his estate, so that Hester seldom saw him except when the whole family was present, when he was particularly careful to treat the two girls exactly alike. More often still when there were guests present, too, for Churleigh was hardly ever free from guests. Her little

cousins had grown to love her very dearly, and for this she was more grateful than she could have told.

It was a July afternoon, and in the long drawing-room (its windows open to the terrace) the whole family lingered in different degrees of idleness and expectation; the oppressive heat being the cause of their idleness, the anticipated arrival from Cambridge the cause of their expectancy.

Bella, on a low couch near Lord Leaholm, who had lately returned from London, begged him to tell her what he had been saying in Parliament, for she was very tired of the dull country life he had left behind him, and this had been, she said, up to now, a particularly long day. And the earl talked with a provoking laziness and lightness; but he noticed how Bella every now and then opened her eyes and gave a hasty look around.

Hester at a distant window, gazing into the hot and heavy stillness without, hearing without heeding the changing voice, and the easy, flowing nonsense that it talked. Lord Leaholm, she thought, came to Churleigh very, very often. Of course, he must be going to marry Bella—at least, to ask Bella to marry him. Poor Bella! who so little knew what a black, sinful heart she was trying to win.

Humming very softly to herself, to prevent recurring to this old thought, Hester looked along the avenue, watching for the first glimpse of the carriage which had been sent to the station to meet Tom—the little Tom Lane whom she could just remember as having been kind and pleasant to her on that terrible day when her childhood had seemed to end—the new cousin to whose vacation she had been unconsciously looking forward as a break to her own loneliness.

“Hessie,” said Mrs. Bruce, rousing herself suddenly, “I wish you would write that letter to Aberswys, and say we take the house, and shall be there on—what day, Bella?”

“Oh, mamma,” cried Bella, gayly; “I am so delighted to go to Aberswys! Let me see: we are to dine with the Dyotts at Rebbington on Wednesday, to meet grandma. Then we are to bring Lydia and grandma back with us. They will be ready, of course, so we can go next day.”

“Suppose we all go from Hereford. It will be quite as near for us to drive from Rebbington to Hereford as to Ruyglen. Alfred and Hester and the children can leave Ruyglen by the 1.45 train, and we will meet in Hereford. Will that do?”

"Famously; but is not papa going to dine at Rebbington, too?"

"No, he is engaged; but I have accepted for Tom. Hessie, my dear, I am sorry you cannot come, but Mrs. Paley and Miss Dyott return with us, and we four shall fill the brougham. Tom must ride."

"I should not at all have cared to go, thank you," said Hester, taking up her pen. "Then which day shall I say?"

"Say the house must be ready for us on Wednesday, as the servants will arrive then. We can be ~~in~~ on Thursday to a six-o'clock dinner. Lord Leaholme, when have you decided to go down?"

He knew as well as she did that the two visits had been arranged to suit each other, but there was no sign of this in his ready, courteous reply.

"I shall not be an hour behind you, Mrs. Bruce. I shall join your train somewhere."

"Why not go with us from Rebbington, as you dine with us there on Wednesday? I hope you do not forget that," said Bella, playfully.

"I remember my invitation distinctly, Miss Lane."

"Lydia told me you were going," she resumed, highly relieved by his answer, but reserving to herself Lydia's motive for telling, as described in four sheets of ivory note, sweetly perfumed, and embossed with monogram in purple, green and gold.

Hester folded her letter and addressed it, "Yrnteous House, West Parade, Aberswys," and rose to take it into the hall. As she did so, Lord Leaholme rose too.

"Wait one moment, please, Miss Bruce. I want to beg a favor from you all, and you generally escape me. Your daughter says you have no engagement for Tuesday, Mrs. Bruce. Would you come to the Abbey for a few hours that day?"

Considering that visits to Wye Abbey were the pleasantest and proudest visits she ever paid, and would have been even without the enjoyments and luxuries which always awaited her there; would have been with only the one joyful possibility, she felt, when she looked round the vast and beautiful place, of its one day belonging to her daughter—her daughter, the Countess of Leaholme! considering this, Mrs. Bruce's face was an extraordinary model of matronly deliberation, as she pondered the question.

"Oh, mamma," exclaimed Bella, with one of her little

starts, "you must not say no! You must not remember some other horrid engagement. Wye is in its most beautiful dress this time of year."

"And my child in her most beautiful dress shall grace it," meditated Mrs. Bruce, in her complacent thoughts; "something may possibly come of it. Do you not consider it a great bore to entertain us so often, Lord Leaholme?" she asked, smiling gently.

"I wish I could do it better; it is a great pleasure to me. Miss Bruce, will you come, too?"

She had waited at his request, but with evident unwillingness; leaning on the table with one hand, and toying with the letter in the other.

"Thank you, but I would rather not," she answered, in a low, resolute tone.

"You always refuse me," he said, proudly. "Why is it?"

"I feel no anxiety to see Wye Abbey, my lord. What else need I say?"

"Nothing else," he answered, a great deal more earnestness in his voice than he guessed, "unless you can say you will come because I entreat you, and have entreated you often. You are kind and generous, and always do as others ask you."

"You do not understand me at all, my lord," she said, with a bright, saucy smile. "I never do what I am asked, unless it suits my inclination."

"And this would not?" The voice was very low and pained.

"Not at all."

"I cannot understand your persistent contempt of my request," he went on, forgetting the presence of the others in his proud, hurt anger. "I have asked you so often, as I have never"—he corrected himself suddenly, his longing eyes still fixed upon her careless face—"as I will ask you once again, Miss Bruce"—the words were more than gentle now—"Will you, at my entreaty, come to my house, and let me entertain you—just for once?"

"I cannot answer that," she said, with a quivering light in her eyes, "but it will not be until I—until I—forget."

With a sudden relief in his face, he looked down upon her dress, and began to speak again, kindly and persuasively. She interrupted him, glad that he had misunderstood.

"I should be but a gloomy visitor anywhere, I think; don't you, Bella?" she added, lightly, as she left the room.

"Lord Leaholme," said Bella, gayly, "what time are we to come?"

"How soon may I look for you?" he asked, pushing back his hair rather wearily.

"Any hour you like to name; and oh, it will be so delicious!" exclaimed Bella, when the time had been arranged.

"And will you drive with us from Rebbington on Thursday, and go on to Aberswys from Hereford station with us?"

"I am too extensive an appendage to be put into the carriage-pockets, Miss Lane, and I recollect you told Miss Bruce you had no seat to spare."

"Oh, yes, I quite forgot," she cried, hastily. "Mamma did say so. How stupid of me!"

When Hester entered the drawing-room, a few minutes before dinner-time, Mr. Lane stood upon the hearth-rug talking to his step-father. A slight, fair, handsome fellow he was, with pleasant, frank, blue eyes, and light, bright hair, just a shade less yellow than the short mustache and whiskers. His dress was the very extreme of fashion and elegance, and his slight white fingers rather extensively ringed. He bore the consciousness in every look and gesture of knowing himself well-looking and well-dressed: a pleasant, comfortable consciousness it seemed to be, too, and made him equally pleased with himself and the world which had endowed, and must admire, him.

This was what Hester fancied she saw when she greeted him, never guessing how much her wistful, welcoming eyes had looked for more.

"Isabel, I suppose you must have your son to take you to dinner to-night," said Mr. Bruce, smiling, as he gave his arm to Hester, who noticed that he seemed well pleased to have his step-son at home.

The meal was a cheerful one. Hester chatted brightly to her uncle and Tom, as she sat between them; but Lord Leaholme's remarks from the other side of the table met no answering word or smile from her, unless, as it sometimes happened, they fitted in very readily, and she was taken by surprise. But there were others ready to answer a remark of his, so that her avoidance of it was not observed.

The children came into the drawing-room laden with presents which Tom had brought them, and they settled themselves at Hester's side to exhibit them, discovering at once, with children's quick appreciation of sympathy, who would

feel most interest in them. Bella hovered about in a more amiable mood than usual—so glad, Hester thought she must be, to have her brother at home.

“Tom always remembers the children, does not he, Alf? but he has brought me no present at all. He ought to have brought one for you, too, HESSIE.”

“I should have been too much astonished even to open it,”
ughed Hester.

“He has collected such a quantity of books. I think he must have bought one at every station—shining, yellow books—you know them.”

“Shining within or without?”

Bella looked at her angrily for a moment, then gave a little laugh. “I mean novels, you know; and you are fond of novels.”

“Yes,” she answered, quietly, winding the string round a new German top.

“He will lend them to you, I am sure. I will ask him.”

“I shall be most happy,” said a voice behind the girls—a pleasant voice, but not a strange one, and Bella turned with a smile.

“Lord Leaholme, what made you think we were speaking of you?”

“Am I wrong? Then to whom is Miss Bruce to be consigned for the purpose of literary investigations?”

The color in Bella’s face grew deeper and deeper, though he had not looked at her during his quiet speech.

“I said that Tom would like to show his books.”

“I see.”

He was handling the toys then, criticising and admiring them; but presently he offered her his arm, for her mother had asked her to sing.

“Allow me, Miss Lane, for I should not like you to feel it necessary to teach *me*, too, how to pay attention to a lady.”

While she warbled an assurance to the audience that, if she might be allowed a choice in the matter, she would emphatically rather be a “fairy, sportive and gay,” than the inferior being Nature had designed her, Tom Lane came in and took a seat beside the children, playing carelessly with the toys, and breaking one before his soft, white fingers had held it for a minute.

“Do you find it very dull and slow down here, Miss Bruce?” he asked, giving her a long, frank, admiring gaze.

"I have not done so yet. Is it generally considered so?"

"Well, I suppose not. They call it such a beautiful country; but I should not care to live here always."

"It would not satisfy you?"

"No. I should require more change and gayety. At least, until now I have——"

"I fancied so," she interrupted, but with great seriousness. "I saw that you required something more."

"College life is good for that," he went on, pleasantly, "though a fellow may be hard worked."

"Are you a fellow already, then, or do you escape the hard work?"

"What a willful misunderstanding!" he laughed, looking at her grave lips. "But really there is no danger of one's dying of *ennui* there."

"It would hardly answer to build universities for the purpose of cutting off the rising generation in that distressing manner."

"But, positively," he continued, "I have heard of a fellow who really and truly died of *ennui*."

"What a lingering, painful suicide it must have been! Is there no English name for it?"

"No one English word expresses just that, I think."

"That excuses my thoroughly English mind from comprehending it, then."

"Why have you grown suddenly so intent on your work?" he asked, staying his hearty laugh to speak in a patronizing sort of way, which did not suit the young voice at all; "you bend over it as if you hated to look at me."

"I cannot work well without looking."

"I do not like to see ladies working at night. This is an idle time, is it not, Leaholme?" he added, as the earl joined them.

"Perhaps Miss Bruce does not acknowledge that there is such a time in all the day."

"I acknowledge," she said, coolly, "that that time extends over the greater part of my day."

"I like real idleness in the noblest sense of the word," remarked Tom, "such as I intend to pursue through this last vacation. What's the matter, Bella?"

"Nothing, except that I am tired."

"I will refresh you, then. Come, I have a new song; such a glorious length! and it is grand to play, Bella, for you may

run while you read it. I brought it from K." (K. stood for Cambridge, in Tom's vernacular.)

Though Bella did not seem to be very eager over the prospect, she could not gracefully refuse, and went with her brother. Quite unconsciously, Hester's eyes followed him to the piano, rested a moment on the careless, fair young face, then dropped upon her work again with a shadow of disappointment. She raised her head to kiss the children with a little low-breathed sigh.

Lord Leaholme, playing listlessly with the contents of her work-box, spoke very quietly, as the music rattled on:

"It is almost sad to have an imagination so bright that the reality follows in disappointment, is it not?"

Hester felt that she could have burst into passionate tears, and her hand shook over her work. She answered with a quick "No," which he might translate as he pleased.

"Do you think not? Then I am glad; for though the glowing imagination is in itself a pleasant companion, still it brings that punishment often, does it not?"

"You said that it brought a disappointment—I think that was your word, and I suppose you speak from experience."

Bending his head still lower over his restless hands, he went on with rapid nervousness.

"It is all of little use, my sympathy, my interference, my—call it what you will, neither you nor I shall be likely to name it rightly. All little use. You have been, and you are still, determined to mistrust and to repulse me. Yet you are but a lonely-hearted girl, yearning for sympathy and love. I am a strong, solitary man, hardened to any loneliness my life may know; but God knows that I would give even the blessing I must covet for this life of mine, if I might by so doing make yours what—I fancy it could be."

Hester did not answer, but the long, curved lashes drooped a little as she worked on. He looked into her down-bent face long and steadfastly, then raised his head with impatience.

"I ought to have grown accustomed to this now. My words have been met with scorn enough lately to have taught me indifference. Why do you not answer me?"

"I am sitting here content and cheerful," said Hester, quietly "Why should I answer for a 'lonely-hearted girl, who yearns for sympathy and love?'"

He laughed quick and low.

"You do not recognize the picture, then?"

"Not as a portrait. There is no reality in any feature."

"Then I am very glad, Miss Bruce. I would rather my eye should see the picture than that your heart should feel its truth. Mrs. Bruce is calling you."

"Now, Hester," said Mrs. Bruce, with a little significance, "go and fetch your uncle into tea. Those roses of his are powerful rivals of mine, Lord Leaholme. Poor child!" she continued placidly, as Hester stepped through the open window, and the earl took his stand beside his hostess. "I am afraid I shall find it impossible to teach her how necessary it is in society to forget or lose sight of one's little cares or whims."

"Does Miss Bruce find it difficult to forget them even in our society?" he asked, propping himself against the chimney-piece, and courteously awaiting her answer.

"I do not know exactly what to make of her," Mrs. Bruce resumed, in a plaintive murmur, as she slowly stirred her tea. "She seems perfectly indifferent to the kindness we show her."

"Not to Alf's and Wattie's, I remark," he replied, with a grave smile, which she could not interpret.

"Oh, she romps and plays with them just like a school-girl! Indeed, she has just about as much manner—or rather as little—as if she were only a school-girl. I shall have a great deal of anxiety when she goes out again."

"Is she not out now? I see her there among the roses with Mr. Bruce."

Mrs. Bruce laughed elegantly (if the term be admissible), and looked up from her tea-cup.

"How you teaze, Lord Leaholme! Of course I mean going out into a wider range of society."

"Perhaps in so wide a range her faults and failings may be less observed. What effect do you fear when she goes out? Will shamed society immediately go in?"

"I fear that she will speak and act with thoughtless conceit, as she does so often now, and make me uncomfortable by her ignorance of the *bienseances*."

"Of the—I beg your pardon."

"Of the *bienseances*, I said. Good society is arbitrary in its claims upon us, you know."

"It depends a good deal, I think, on what we have to offer at its shrine," said the earl, in a tone of sarcasm, which the listener's ear was not keen enough to detect. "If your

troublesome charge is found in lamentable ignorance of that Frankenstein you call the *bienseances*, the melancholy fact will, I dare say, be hushed up, in pity for one so young—and so very pretty.”

He walked to the table as he spoke, and took his tea from Bella's hand with a smile. When he resumed his stand on the rug, he inquired, in a different tone, how long it was since Mr. Walter Bruce died.

“About a year and a half, now.”

“Miss Bruce has been with you only three months of that time?”

“Three months; and we don't know her a bit better than we did the day she came,” said the lady, with a hopeless sigh.

“Because there is nothing more to know, mamma,” remarked Bella, from the table. “I knew all there was to know of her years ago at school.”

“You *have* made mistakes in character once or twice before, Bella,” said Tom, bluntly, but with great decision, as he imitated the earl's easy attitude; “and I see a great deal behind those beautiful clear eyes of hers.”

Leaholme looked at him coolly and pleasantly, speaking to Mrs. Bruce with great apparent indifference.

“Pray, how many years will elapse before Miss Bruce is initiated into the *bienseances*?”

“Oh, I shall take her whenever she likes to leave off her mourning. But I should fancy she would not think of that just at present,” Mrs. Bruce replied, with a very strong wish in her own mind as to when she should desire that event to take place.

“Then, judging by the strong objections she had manifested to accept my invitations to the Abbey, that exodus of hers is a long way off. Lane, have the kindness to give me notice next time you intend to jog my elbow, and deposit half my tea on the rug.”

“I thought you did not see she was coming in,” whispered Tom.

“Miss Bruce,” the earl said, looking at her with intent amusement, “Lane has very nearly spoiled my boots and his own, by his gentle manual reminder on my arm that you were within hearing—for you see we were talking of you just then.”

“You are worse than Dr. Johnson,” said Hester, merrily,

as she carried her uncle his tea. "Poor Mr. Lane! What a failure his gentle manual reminder was!"

"What was it about Johnson?" Leaholme asked, trying (as he found himself forever trying) to win her to speak directly to himself.

"Only the history of three kicks he received under the table, and proclaimed over it," she said, her lips very grave as she took her own tea, but the flashing eyes full of laughter.

"Why?" he asked, his own eyes reflecting the laugh in hers.

"I believe you know; if not, Boswell will tell you better than I can," she answered, a sudden change in her tone and face as she remembered to whom she was speaking.

"Yes. I begin to feel proudly conscious of the resemblance," said the earl, composedly. "Gazing steadfastly on you, Miss Bruce, and continuing to do so as you advanced: such was, unfortunately, the abstraction of the mind, that the eye did not immediately take cognizance of its object."

"A very good imitation," laughed Mr. Bruce; "I could fancy myself taking a walk down Fleet street with the big doctor."

"Own the resemblance, Miss Bruce."

Hester's glance at the noble face and figure opposite her, and the quick picturing in her mind of the burly form and heavy face of which he spoke, brought a comical smile to her lips.

"I think Mr. Lane will never jog your elbow again," she said, with a funny little laugh.

"Then, thank you for curing him, for you have no idea how unpleasant it is."

CHAPTER VIII.

"WHERE I WOULD BE."

THE hay-makers in the great upper meadow at Churleigh had gathered under the broad oak at the gate, to regale on what cider might be left in their casks, now that the day's work was nearly over, and to discourse in sentences few and

short, and very much to the point (where a point was obtainable), as is the manner of hay-makers when the broiling summer days are drawing to their close.

High up in the field, in the shadow of the tall hedge, sat Hester, in her crumpled, spotless mourning-dress with its black trimmings, her hands clasped round her knees, as she looked wistfully over the sunny valley to the misty hills beyond; a swimming, tearful look gathering in the great dark eyes.

At a sudden shout behind her, a little involuntary smile broke on her tremulous lips; and when a small face peered over her shoulder, she raised hers—all glad and bright—to meet it.

“Isn’t it jolly for them all to go to Rebbington like to-day?” said Wattie, as his brother came running up. “I mean, unless you want to be at Rebbington too, Hessie.”

“I would much rather be just where I am,” said the girl, softly stroking the little head that lay against her; “just between you two, with the sunshine dancing round us, and the distant hills in shadow, and the busy hay-makers down there working away while we are idle. Would you rather be here by me, or sitting very upright by a person you never saw before in all the world, and taking hot soup?”

“Here, of course,” answered Wattie, pushing a little closer into her encircling arm; “but you are grown up, Hessie; you ought to like it.”

“Ought I, dear? Then I must try to learn. Now, come home to tea.”

“And afterward the story, Hessie?”

“Yes. Now for a race.”

The men and women rested from their occupation to watch the race down the slope. Hester had intended to hold back and let one of the children win it; but in the enjoyment of the run she forgot, and came gayly first among the laborers, her white dress flying behind her, her hat, like John Gilpin’s, left upon the road, and her face radiant under her disheveled locks. She looked back, laughing at her defeated companions, as she seated herself on a hay-cock, while one of the men brought her her hat with great delight.

“Thank you, Ezra,” she said, with a pleasant smile.

She knew most of the laborers and cottagers round Churleigh now, and knew them *really*—knew them to help and

comfort, and always to cheer. The little fires in the cottage grates burned all the more cheerily when she sat beside them, a little, brown, shabby child caressed gently by her soft little hands, or an ailing baby held in her tender, pitiful embrace.

"God bless her sweet face!" whispered the humble, loving hearts, in their grateful thoughts of her. And the blessing ran from door to door, and was a surer, purer light upon her way than the dazzling glare of lamp-light which irradiated Bella Lane and her fellow-guests at Rebbington just then, and in which light—brilliant as it was—poor Bella looked in vain for the face which was the one source and spring of the greatest light her shallow nature had accepted.

"Shall I rake up more hay and make your seat a bit comfortable, miss?"

"Yes, please," said Hester, rising readily, because she knew it would be more pleasant to Ezra to have his kindly-meant offer accepted. "That is comfortable, indeed. Now, boys, go away, or you will spoil my seat. Are you not ashamed of having been conquered?"

They laughed, throwing up their caps as a cooling process.

"Ezra," asked Hester, presently, "how is it that you are working here? Is not Mr. Cameron cutting his hay at the rectory?"

"The harvest's over there, miss. It ain't much of a one; and I'm allus allowed to come for the squire's half a day at a time. 'Tis a bit of extra for me, and an old custom."

"Your harvest was soon over, then; though Mr. Cameron told us he should not be well enough to see to it himself."

"True, miss, he wasn't; but his lordship sent us over two or three men of his'n—three of them; capital hands they wur, too, and we got parson's harvest over in no time. Then his lordship said——"

"How is Anna, now?" Hester asked, turning impatiently from that subject.

"She's rightly, thank ye, miss, and so's the little 'un; and she's saying, if ye wouldn't mind, miss, if so be as you should make no objections, she wants to ask you, if you please, miss, about the name."

"Of course," answered Hester, readily, "that is a great matter to be decided. What do you want it to be?"

"Just that, miss; both of us want the same. She choosed it first, miss, if you didn't mind; and I said, if so be as you

would, I should jest love her all the better—if I knew how.”

“Is it *Anna* you are going to name her?” asked Hester, a little at sea, as she tried in vain to read the proud young father’s meaning in his face.

“No, miss,” replied Ezra, the red showing through all the sunburn on his cheeks, “we thought to call the little ’un, please—Miss Hester.”

“Well, Ezra,” she asked, thinking he was addressing her afresh, “call her what?”

“Jest that, please, jest that—Miss Hester.”

Hester laughed her pretty, pleasant laugh, as his meaning broke upon her

“Do not have her baptized ‘Miss,’ whatever you do, Ezra. As for her being Hester, if you like the name I shall be very glad to have her for a namesake. And Ezra,” added the girl, with sudden earnestness, “ask Anna if I may be the baby’s godmother. Ask her if I may have a share in—I mean, ask her if I may help her. Consult with her, and she will tell me to-morrow.”

“Thank ye, thank ye, miss. And we may really christen her—Hester?”

It was quite a long pause Ezra made before he could summon courage enough to give the name without the prefix he had been used to.

“I hope you will, indeed. Now, boys, do get me up and come home to tea.”

And while Ezra stammered for words of thanks, she gave him a gay little nod, said good-night to the other laborers, and walked slowly home, one small boy leaning on each arm, until they came within sight of the tea-table, which was spread upon the terrace on the western side of the house; James, assisted by Ruth (the children’s maid), hovering about it, adding little embellishments or dainties.

James, despite the sense of gravity inseparable from his curled whisker and Turvydropian deportment, indulged in a very gratified and appreciative smile, as he stood back for the crushed white dress and disordered hair to pass.

“She’s almost too like a child,” he said to himself, resuming his normal gravity, “but it’s a pleasure to do anything for her; and I hope it may be a good while before the youngness is sneered out of her. I guess troubles go deep with her, for all her brightness.”

When Hester came out again, the little lads were sitting up in great state and expectancy, one on each side her chair, looking down the table with relishing eyes and lips.

"Oh, Hessie," began Alf, eagerly, "isn't it better than tea in the nursery with Ru——?"

Hester checked him thoughtfully.

"Ruth, you should enjoy the change, too. James, we do not want any waiting upon. Half our enjoyment will be in serving ourselves, and having no bell to ring, and no wish to ring it."

So James and Ruth went away, nothing loath, to a long chat in the pantry, and a long gossip in the housekeeper's room, and the merry tea began.

Hester, preparing a slice of melon for Alf, heard a step advance behind.

"James, we really do not want you," she said, without stopping to look up. "Oh, dear Alf, why not your fork? Does melon taste so much better flavored with little fingers and thumbs?"

"You only half inculcate your lesson, Miss Bruce," said a gay voice that startled them all; "you miss the chief point. Alf, mind this:

"Your meat genteelly with your fingers raise;
But as in eating there's a certain grace,
Beware, lest with your greasy hands you should besmear
your face.'"

The boys were far too stately to think of jumping up to Lord Leaholme, as they would have done at any other time, but they both looked up for his kiss.

"Then I may eat my melon in my fingers?" asked Alf, anxiously looking into the earl's face.

"Of course, if you promise never to touch your face again. If you think you might forget some day and touch it, you must certainly use those silver weapons. Miss Bruce, are your fingers in a melon-choly condition too, that you cannot give them to me for a moment?"

"I thought you were at Rebbington," she faltered, rather bewildered, but keeping her proud little right hand on the tray as she stood.

"And you wonder why I am not?"

"Yes."

"Or rather, you wonder why I ventured here? That is the thought I read in your face. I will be truthful to you, at least. I came simply because I could not help coming."

"An unanswerable reason, my lord. Do you feel that you can resist patronizing our tea?"

"In that I am powerless also, if it is offered me," he answered, taking a seat beside Wattie, while Alf ran to order another cup. "But I doubted that very much, as soon as I perceived the nature of my welcome, or, rather, the absence of my welcome. Wattie, may I have some strawberries?"

"Do," said the child, merrily. "But how did you guess we were the masters to-day? We are to do exactly what we like; and Hessie lets us, and does what we tell her."

"Oh, I see," said the earl, with a look of intense enlightenment; "and I must do what you tell me too, if I have tea at this enchanted table, eh?"

"Yes; obey us two," laughed Alf, as he took his seat again; "and won't you help Hessie to tell us 'Jack and the Beanstalk' after? She says it's very long."

"And we must begin one at each end and meet in the middle, to make it shorter, like the man who read the two volumes of his book at the same time?"

"No: but really, Lord Leaholme, is 'Jack and the Beanstalk' very long?"

"The beanstalk is very long; I don't know about Jack. I dare say he was a very good height for his age."

"But is the story very long?"

"Very; so long that your cousin will never be able to remember it."

"Oh, she will," answered Wattie, decidedly; "she remembers longer than that. Sometimes stories last all a week, and she never forgets them."

"Your memory is good, Miss Bruce," he said, turning to her slowly.

"No," she answered, rather low. "And yet I wish it were not so good as it is."

"That is an odd wish for one so young. I have lived at least fifteen years longer than you have, and yet I would feel shame to say it—though some of my remembrances are but dark ones."

She was looking at him steadily, an odd shadow growing in her eyes, while her lips, though pressed so tightly together, quivered visibly.

"Are you so surprised, then," he said, gently, as he watched her, "that across a span of four-and-thirty years, I should see some spots on which a gloom and sadness rest—yet that I should not wish to lose their memory?"

"Not surprised at all that you should see them," she said, in a low, unnatural voice; "only surprised that you can bear to look back at all."

With a slight, quick laugh, he pushed his hair from the handsome face, to which a sudden flush had risen.

"Do you recollect what a bad bargain poor Redlaw made when he bartered his memory, Miss Bruce?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have taken warning by him, and will keep mine as green as possible while I may. Thank you, Alf. Wattie, what had I better do with these strawberries, now that I have them here?"

"Make them like mine; take the green off."

"Treat them the very way your cousin wishes me to treat my memory? Very well; here they go. Now what will you give me to compensate for the loss of the green?"

"Sugar and cream. Let Hester do it; she does it best. She makes it so delicious."

"Will you make it delicious for me, Miss Bruce? Sugar and cream are ineffectual in my hands; I can neither sweeten nor enrich on my own behalf."

"Another grievous incapacity, my lord. But though you could not help yourself about coming here, you are expected to help yourself, now that you are here."

He did so merrily, determined neither to notice nor resent Hester's want of cordiality; but the delicacies he praised and pretended to enjoy were hardly tasted.

"What a different flavor these strawberries have from those which are destined for the dessert-table at Rebbington!"

"Where you should be," supplemented Hester, passing him his cup. "Did you forget your engagement until you got here?"

"No. I had every intention of going; and I believe the carriage was waiting, when, somehow, I allowed the good intention to go to certain commissioners of paving (not those to whom Mrs. Nickleby ought to have been niece) by letting a few lines run in my head until they asserted themselves in action."

"What were those potent words?" asked Hester.

“Will you tell me if I make a mistake? but they ran almost to this effect:

“ ‘I would I were where I would be;
Then should I be where I am not.
And where I am I will not be;
Yet where I should be, will I not.’ ”

Hester was laughing softly.

“Incorrigible, my lord, to make such a new version of the longing words.”

“Will you tell me what they really are?”

“They really are a little more resigned and unselfish. You could not have ignored your invitation if the *real* lines had been potent.”

“Then I am very glad they were not. My dear little fellows, do you know that it is late at night? Look! even the sun is going to bed, and he sits up terribly late in July.”

The boys began to talk more eagerly than ever, to do away with the impression that it might be too late for them, and thought it would be advisable to go for a race with the dogs. Lord Leaholme and Hester sat down upon the broad stone steps watching the sunset; its pure, rich light touched them softly, but the restfulness and beauty of the hour stole into one heart only. They sat in perfect silence. Hester leaned back in a corner of the steps, a wavering pink flush deepening on her white dress, and a strange, far-away wonderment on her quiet face. Her thoughts were back among the clear and sorrowful memories of the past, and she shuddered to feel that so near her lingered the false, persuasive mouth, and the deceitful heart, which had worked so much wrong and wickedness. She tried to shake off the thought, feeling her eyes grow hot and angry in the ruddy light. He was not worthy any thought or remembrance of hers, she said to herself. He was so low and insignificant in her eyes, that it was contemptible to harass herself thus in his presence with bitter memories. She could recall, too, a few plain words which the setting sun brought to her mind, as it went down upon this wrath of hers—the flood of glory powerless to touch or brighten it.

Lord Leaholme lounged on the stone balustrade a little way above her. He was not watching her, but every now and then he gave one brief, comprehensive glance down; and as

he did so the far-away flush of the evening sky lighted up a very gravely tender face.

The two figures had been so still and silent since they had been left together, so heedless each one of what the silence must seem to the other, so dreamily, sadly still, that both started when the little boys ran back.

"Now the story, Hessie," cried Wattie, his race being over.

"Now for 'Jack and the Beanstalk.'"

"Do you really mean to say you have never heard about Jack?" she asked, simply to get time.

"Never, indeed."

"Oh, he was a rare fellow, was Master Jack," remarked the earl, "and a rare plant was his beanstalk, and led to the most wonderful place in the world, and the most wonderful results."

"Hessie, please send Ruth away," exclaimed Alf, eagerly, kneeling down to bring a pleading little face close to hers. "She is come for us before we've had our story."

"Leave them a little longer, please, Ruth," said Hester, rather absently, putting one arm around Alf, as she sat with the other resting on her knee, and her chin in her hand. "Come for them again in about as long a time as it would take you to read 'Jack and the Beanstalk.'"

Ruth went away, astonished, to tell James—the recipient of all Ruth's confidence—that Miss Bruce and his lordship were making up tales and nursery rhymes, and she was to guess how long it would last. And James, pondering that matter, thought it would last exactly the time that it would take them to stroll down the laurel walk, provided they *did* stroll.

"There was, once upon a time," said Hester, beginning in the true old orthodox fashion, and looking very serious over it, "a little boy called Jack. He was not christened John, like most little boys who are called Jack, but he was only Jack, and had no other name at all; yet he was so clever that this little name of his grew more celebrated than many and many a prince's."

"What did he do?" asked Alf, all in a hurry, standing before her with two little eager hands in her lap, and watching her lips with intense expectancy.

Tapping his cheek lightly for his impertinence, then kissing it with a laugh at his curiosity, Hester went on with the tale circumstantially; but when Alf's involuntary exclamation

and eager face provoked a laugh from Lord Leaholme, she stopped, remembering his presence with a mortified start.

"I had forgotten you were listening, Lord Leaholme. This must be a trying ordeal for you. I will tell you the rest to-morrow, boys."

"No, no!" they cried, together; "you promised us. Oh, Hessie! you oughtn't to break your word."

"But you will wait just till to-morrow, dears?" she asked, softly. "If not, of course I will tell you now."

"Ye—es, we'll wait," they resolved, trying to speak contentedly.

"It is far wiser to leave it for to-morrow," said Lord Leaholme, with a quick glance into her face; "you would have reached a most unpleasant part just as Ruth came, if you had not."

"What part?" cried Alf, all eagerness.

"Oh! of course I must not tell you. But I believe that rosy butcher turns out to be a rogue."

"Hessie didn't say he was rosy."

"She must have forgotten, then. He was very rosy; butchers generally are. And I believe he makes simple little Jack play cards with him—he had a greasy pack in his pocket, but I don't know whether that is the custom of butchers—and he wins back all the money. He was a gambler and a cheat, this rosy butcher, do you see? and he did not care what misery he brought on poor easy Jack, and so, of course, on Jack's home, on his father, and on his mother, and on his little only sister—Miss Bruce, are you faint—are you ill?"

She rose hastily, and shrunk from him, as he advanced, in his eager surprise. Then she tried to still her quivering lips, and hide the sudden passion in her eyes.

"Ill? no; but let the little ones go. Why talk to them of such things? Why talk to them of the misery God may be merciful never to let them feel? Why call it all back to me? I mean—that—this—cruelty—is—O God! more than I can sometimes bear."

He saw, with innate delicacy, that any word of his would jar upon her now. He turned away, taking Wattie in his arms; and while the child gently caressed the sad, dark face, he kept it hidden from her.

"Now, here is the call to bed again," he said, as Ruth made her appearance once more, as prim and demure as if she had heard nothing in the laurel walk but the shimmering

leaves. "Good-night, dear little lad. Alfy, good-night, old fellow."

They crept up to Hester, instinctively feeling that she would be glad for them to go.

"Hessie, kiss us; we are really going now."

"Good-night, my pets; but I am coming in with you."

"Give me the last kiss," cried Alfy, jumping up as she stooped.

"Run off," said Hester, giving him one of her long, gentle kisses.

The earl caught him as he ran by.

"Why do you not say good-night to me?"

"I did, before I went to Hessie."

"And why not after?" he asked, quizzically, holding the child before him.

"Because I like to kiss Hessie last."

"But she always comes up to you when you are in bed," he said, in a most natural and assured manner, not at all as if it were a guess.

"Yes; but she mightn't to-night."

"And pray, why not to-night, sir?" he asked, still holding Alfy and looking down into his eyes.

"Because you are here; and if Hessie comes away there'll be nobody to talk to you."

He drew the child to his side, and, taking the little face between his hands, bent his own upon it.

"That was just like Hessie's kiss," whispered Alfy, never imagining why it was so.

"There," he said, hurrying him off, "you have not had the last yet. Your cousin will come to you presently, for I am going."

Even as he spoke, he rose and gave her his hand.

"I had hoped, even to the last," he said, as the children turned out of sight, "that you would have come with Mrs. Bruce to Wye yesterday."

"Look! is not that one of your servants riding round the yard? No; I did not care to go out yesterday. Why, Ezra, what is the matter?"

She had broken off, in her cool excuse to him, really frightened, as Ezra Moore came round the house toward them, his face full of panic.

Taking off his hat, in acknowledgment of her speech and presence, Ezra addressed the earl.

"The master, my lord! Only I'm afeard it's too late. He was took at his dinner, they say. I only got home when it was too late, I'm afeard."

"Your master? Mr. Cameron, Moore? Not dead?"

"They think so, my lord. I fetched the doctor in, then I went to th' Abbey for your lordship. There's a servant here now with a horse, as we thought best. I came on parson's own, for better speed."

"I will go at once, Moore. Thank you for coming."

"Thank ye, my lord; the two women's so afeard, and Mr. Ferriman's off at some parson's meet. And he's nought much more than a boy when he's here."

"Will you send my horse round here at once?"

Ezra, without donning his hat, passed on, looking much relieved.

"Good-night, Miss Bruce," said the earl, preparing to mount; "you have very kindly entertained me, though my coming always gives you pain. Believe me, I should not have encroached longer, even if—Death had not called me away."

The glory of the sky died out behind the distant hills, and a faint, cold tremor passed over Hester, as she stood with hands clasped on the white stone, her eyes reflecting the sadness and the mistiness of the evening landscape round her.

It was so hard to have to meet him thus, constantly and closely—so hard that her lines should have fallen in the very spot where he should be—so hard, knowing him, was it to say, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us."

The fair July night grew very cold and dreary to Hester; the hush and the stillness became unbearable. She went in, and sitting beside the small white beds, she leaned her head close to each happy little face, and told the children, in answer to their sleepy questions, that she was not lonely downstairs in the big empty room. Oh no, not at all.

She waited patiently between them until they slept; then, whispering a little prayer to Him who takes the sleeping little ones into his care, she softly rose and crept down the wide staircase, her light footfall leaving the silence undisturbed.

She wandered out again, while the darkness crept round her slowly and gloomily; then went back and tried to read in the lamp-light, listening eagerly the while for her uncle's return.

The stable clock was striking twelve when she heard the wheels stop at the door, and met him in the hall. With a merry reply and a quiet kiss, she answered his surprised exclamation on seeing her; then she hid her face on his shoulders, for she could not stop the tears that had forced their way at last.

"You are tired and sleepy, dear," he said, gently. "You should not have sat up for me."

Raising her face as soon as she could, she told him of the sudden illness of the Rector of Ruyglen; told it to him as a kind of excuse for her tears; and, astonished and grieved, he recalled his dog-cart, and said he would go over and see what could be done.

"I wonder whether Leaholme knows," he mused. "Oh! by the way, he is at Rebbington. Poor old Cameron; quite alone there. Quite alone, I believe, in the world."

As she went down with him to the carriage, she told him that the earl knew.

"Now go to bed at once, dear," he said, kissing her lovingly. "Do not think of dismal things."

She lingered until the faint sound of the wheels died in the distance, then passed in with a step that had a new weariness in it, James thought, as she turned to him with her gentle, bright good-night.

In her own room at last, she lighted the candles on the dressing-table, and looked up to meet in the glass a strangely white, sad face.

"How foolishly I have been feeling all to-night!" she said. "Such a visitor, to begin with, and such a loneliness afterward! That must be why. Poor old Mr. Cameron! I suppose I am very tired; I look so. I hope I shall fall asleep the minute I get into bed. I like to do that, but I do not manage it very often. What a sad house there must be over there—the pleasant, pretty rectory, which lay to-day all in the sunshine! Who will come there now to teach us how to spend these little, restless lives of ours? I wish it would be some one who could help me; but *he* will choose him, of course. It will be a gift of his to some good man. *Good*, I say, but how can I say it of a pastor of *his* choosing? Ah, me! there is a tangled web before my eyes, whichever way I turn. I wonder will good old Thomas make me more happy and content to-night!"

She took up the quaint old book, and opened at the place where her mark lay, her eyes straying mechanically over the lines:

"I shall judge the guilty and the innocent; but by a secret judgment I would beforehand prove them both."

She closed the book hastily, taking up the one that had lain beside it, and reading quietly for a time. At last she laid her head upon the pillow, wearily, but very calmly now.

"It is not night if Thou be near."

Again and again she whispered the words, trying to shut out other thoughts which forced themselves into her heart.

"Hold Thou thy cross before my closing eyes."

With the murmured prayer upon her lips, she fell asleep at last; but in the early morning twilight she awoke with a strange start, as there seemed to ring distinctly in her ears a quiet speech which she had fancied unheeded and forgotten:

"I should not have encroached longer, even if—Death had not called me away."

CHAPTER IX.

OFF TO ABERSWYS.

"WHAT a pale little morning face, Hessie!" said her uncle, looking up from his paper as she entered the breakfast-room. "It wants the sea-breeze sadly. Poor Cameron was dead, dear, when I reached the rectory; had been dead for hours. I did not leave until dawn this morning, and then I left Leaholme there. He thinks to stay until the funeral is over; if not, he will come from Aberswys for it next week, and to see about a temporary substitute. Young Ferriman is quite staggered by his rector's sudden death. Poor Cameron! he was a good fellow—a thoroughly good fellow."

"Then the death, without an illness, was merciful, uncle."

"I don't know, dear; I think we would all choose the warning, and the power to say a few last words to those we love."

"Mr. Cameron has done a great deal of good in the parish."

"A great deal. I know no place in England where the people are more judiciously cared for, but it is as much the earl's doings as the parson's. Leaholme takes such a thorough, downright interest in them; and, beyond that, has

something about him that makes them take such a thorough, downright interest in *him*, that they really care to please him. He has not had very much trouble here, certainly, but he had an immense deal at Leaholme. It is a manufacturing place, you know, and the people would not brook a shade of interference that *was* interference. But they are all loyal enough now; and because they know the earl likes them to enjoy themselves as well as work, they are anxious to work as well as enjoy themselves. I must take you over to Leaholme some day; the castle is the show-place of the county."

"I don't care about seeing it, Uncle Alf. I would sooner see other places," said Hester, tired of the subject.

"You need not stay, James," said Mr. Bruce, as the butler took off the covers; "I know you are busy out there. Did all the other servants go off last night?"

"All who are to go, sir, except myself and Ruth. She is to take care of the young gentlemen on the journey."

"I should think *we* might do that, Hessie; Ruth wants to be taken care of herself. Can you manage to do it, James?"

"Certainly, sir," replied James, with a face so imperturbable that his master wondered whether he ever allowed even Ruth herself to see it change.

"The luggage is all gone, I suppose?"

"Nearly all, sir."

"And the train leaves at 1:45. Well, have the carriage at the door in time, and you and Ruth be ready. Send Hales to my office in ten minutes."

"Will Hales act as sole manager in your absence, uncle?" asked Hester, before he relapsed into his papers.

"Yes, my dear, but I shall run over myself now and then to see how things are going on."

"You expect to be soon tired of Aberswys, I can see, Uncle Alf."

"Never mind, so that you are not. Englishmen, as a rule, like to live in their own castles, and not feel, every time they pass a bottle down the table, that they are booked so much for scratches. Here's a capital article of the duke's. I will pass it to you, presently."

"Pass me something else in the meantime. You are such a terrible monopolizer, uncle."

But just then the boys ran in, and breakfast went on merrily, without books or papers. When it was over, Hester strolled into the garden to overlook the packing of the fruit and

flowers that were to go to Aberswys; then she ordered her horse, and set off rapidly along the Ruyglen road. She stopped before a little white cottage on the outskirts of the village, and beckoning a boy to hold her horse, dismounted and entered. She stepped lightly up the steep stairs, and bent over a low bed, where a young woman lay holding a sleeping infant.

"I have just remembered, Anna," Hester said, sitting down quietly beside the bed, "that you will want the christening to take place before I come back from Aberswys."

The young mother looked proudly into the girl's bright face. "No, thank you, miss, not till you come home, please. I feel as if, after what you've said, I could not bear baby to have your name les' you gave it her; and it isn't very likely we'd give her any other, now you've allowed us, and both of us so proud."

"Then you will wait for me, will you?" asked Hester, with a glad, tender smile, "that I may not act by proxy. I am not joking in this, Anna. I will not lightly take this duty on myself."

"It's because you do it so in earnest, as well as so willing, Miss Bruce," said Anna, with glistening eyes, "that Ezra and me felt it such kindness—from one so different from us."

"I am rather a lonely girl myself, Anna," said Hester, gently, "and I hope she will love me some day; for I long for all the love that I can win."

"You can't help but win it, miss," replied Anna, smiling into the beautiful young face.

"I should like to win it," she said, quietly. "There is one thing more I want to ask. Tell me about Ezra. Will Mr. Cameron's death throw him out of employment?"

"I fear so," said the young wife, with a sudden cloud upon her face. "Ezra didn't mean to mention it to you just when you were going away, because we know you would care, and be sorry."

"But I asked, you see. Perhaps I may meet Ezra. Hope for the best, Anna, for baby's sake. Your husband is sure to get work, never doubt it. Good-bye. This mite will have a visible face when I come again."

As Hester stood at the cottage-door, taking a bright new sixpence from her purse to give to the boy who had held her horse, she heard Ezra's voice; and, glad that she should see him, she turned and waited. He was coming down the vil-

lage street in his strong, rough clothes and old felt hat, and beside him walked Earl Leaholme. The intense contrast struck Hester comically as she drew back disappointed. Lord Leaholme came up to her slowly, no eagerness in step or tone.

"If you are waiting to mount, Miss Bruce, perhaps I may assist you."

"Thank you," she replied, feeling Ezra's presence.

He took her foot in his gloved hand, but did not raise his eyes to her face as she sprang lightly to the saddle.

"Shall I be late, do you think, my lord?" she asked, a little nervously; "I left my watch at home."

"The train leaves at 1:45. You have to change your dress, and lunch, and drive into Ruyglen. You may allow yourself thirty minutes for your ride back to Churleigh."

He had had his hand on her horse's neck; as he spoke, he drew it away and raised his hat quietly.

"Thank you," she answered, returning his bow. "Ezra, will you walk a few steps beside me? I want to speak to you, but must not venture to wait. Does this sad event at the rectory leave you with nothing to do?" she asked, presently.

"I thought it would, miss, but I've just heard it isn't to. His lordship says I'm to go on just the same; to work on the place just as if the master was here, and his lordship's steward is to pay me; and the two maids, they are to stay on, too. And some parson will come down to preach, or one or two, till the new one's fixed on. And, if you please, he said more—that he wanted to give the little 'un a cake before he went, but he'd rather I bought it; so he gave me this." And Ezra showed, with beaming eyes, the gold he held so tightly in his rough, hard hand.

Hester smiled at his joy, but did not speak.

"It is—was it through your speaking of the little 'un, please miss?" he asked, with an embarrassed little cough.

"I never mentioned the child to him—never, Moore, indeed," she answered, quickly; proud of the consciousness that she had nothing to do with this gift; too proud to bear that he should be supposed to give through *her*; too proud to bear that his gift should be in any way attributed to her.

"Why should you ever have thought such a thing?"

"I don't know exactly, miss, but his lordship seemed so intrusted like in the little 'un; and I'm not his own servant, you see, miss, though he's like gen'rous to us all. He isn't a bit grand and fine when you talk to him, is he, miss?"

"N-o-o. I think not."

"I've heard his own gentleman say he was a great deal prouder-seeming when he was only Cap'n Arundel, than now he's a great nobleman."

"I will not keep you any longer," said Hester, shuddering to hear the hated name. "Good-morning."

Ezra's bow was a curiosity in its way; and because he stood and watched her out of sight, Hester cantered. But past the turn in the road she drew her rein, and among the fragrant honeysuckle and the fresh wild roses she rode along in a deep reverie, with the nameless sadness which so often seized her now, as she rode or walked or sat alone. Never otherwise, yet. She had her own sweet, piquant manner still, her own tender thoughtfulness, her own free, gay laugh. But when her thoughts were her only companions, this inexplicable sadness would creep in, and be neither deadened nor shaken off.

So slowly had she ridden on between the scented hedges, that as she came up the avenue she found, to her consternation, that the carriage was at the door, and the children in it.

"I will not be a minute, uncle," she cried, springing down without a helping hand, and flying past him on the steps.

"There is not time," he called after her. "Come as you are, dear."

"Oh, Uncle Alf!"

"Miss Bruce," whispered Ruth, seizing her in her excitement, "I've been obliged to pack your things. I waited as long as I durst, but I left out your straw hat; it will be comfortabler than that stiff one. Please give me that to put in the box. I'm so sorry you have to travel that way, miss. Need you go to the glass? Here, James, quick. This hat-box must go in somewhere."

"Thank you, Ruth, for the thought. I am all ready now."

The minute had scarcely passed, when Hester ran down the steps and took her seat. James and Ruth got up behind, and the carriage rolled rapidly under the spreading elms. Hester felt the delighted excitement of the children contagious, until a sudden thought quieted her.

"Oh, Uncle Alf! what will they think I have done with my senses?"

"Packed them, perhaps. You do look odd," he added, looking at her curiously.

"Traveling in my habit is an odd thing to do, uncle."

"But you did not look so when you came in."

"No. I changed my hat, which makes this painful incongruity. The hat does not suit the habit, and the habit does not suit the occasion.

"I know another habit of yours which suits the occasion still less, dear—the habit of lagging along the roads."

"And you wish I could get rid of that as readily as I can of this—eh, uncle?" she said, arranging it as well as she could with her little, white, gauntleted hands.

"Yes, of course I do, you saucy little lady. Take care, boys! if you are to perform gymnastics on the edge of the seat, we shall soon have a tumble."

When the carriage stopped at the station, Mr. Bruce looked round.

"No; Leaholme is not coming with us, I see. I feared he would not. Now, then, little ones, don't keep James."

The doors were banged to along the line of carriages, the engine gave its admonitory shriek, and Ruyglen station was left behind. At Hereford they were to take in the rest of the party.

"Here they are," said Mr. Bruce, looking out as the engine slackened speed, "and surely there is Leaholme."

Yes, there surely he was, as they drew up along-side the platform, greeting the ladies, and setting to rest their astonishment at his absence from Rebbington the evening before.

"I thought you were to join us at Ruyglen," said Mr. Bruce, jumping down.

"You see, Lord Leaholme, we are all calling you to account for not having joined us previously," smiled Mrs. Bruce. "Alfred, have you secured a carriage for eight? Why, how is this? I told Ruth to take the boys with her."

"I have them in my own charge instead, Isabel."

"Well, Hessie," began Tom, making his way to her, happy and handsome in his light seaside suit. "We have had a time of intense and unmitigated boredom. I wished myself with you and the chicks."

"And I and the chicks quite forgot to wish for you."

"What have you been doing?"

Hester's eyes danced mischievously.

"Making hay, Tom, while our sun was shining."

"Why do you not come down, Hessie?" said Bella, at the carriage-door. "We want the boys."

"The train will start in a minute or two," said Hester, dreading the effect of her habit.

"Not it," replied Tom, laughing. "They won't go without Leaholme. Come down for a minute."

Hester put on her most independent expression, yet there was a shy hesitation in her step as she joined her aunt and Mrs. Paley.

"Good gracious, Hessie!" exclaimed Bella, throwing back her head in a long laugh. "What made you come that object?"

"I liked it better than not coming at all," she said, a bright blush rising in her cheeks, as old Mrs. Paley arranged her eye-glasses across her nose to scrutinize "the object," and Mrs. Bruce breathed a slow exclamation of distress. "Besides, you ought not to care to take a journey without an object."

"It ought," said Lord Leaholme to her, in a slow, clear voice, "not to take more than twenty minutes to ride from Moore's cottage to Churleigh."

"Ah! but sometimes it does," she answered, carelessly.

"Now take your places, all of you, unless you intend to stay here all day," cried Mr. Bruce.

"I think," said Hester, with a quaint sauciness, "I had better go with the children to another compartment."

"All right," echoed Tom, promptly. "I will go, too."

"And, Lydia, will you join them?" inquired Mrs. Bruce; "that will divide us better. Thanks, dear. Take care of her, Tom."

So Tom put the two girls in with the children, followed them, and arranged for his own comfort, pleased with his position.

Mr. Bruce followed the other ladies, and still the earl stood on the platform a little way apart, talking to a bald, thoughtful-looking little gentleman, who, Tom told Hester, was one of Leaholme's agents.

"You will see about this for me, Newling," he was saying, "but I shall be back for the funeral on Wednesday. Do the best you can for them all. You want a holiday yourself," he added, shaking hands; "you must take it in good time, too. I will see about it. Remember me to the ladies. Good-bye. Ah! Robert, is that you? Then, who went down with the horses yesterday?"

"Simonds, my lord."

"And does he need you to help him, eh? Very well; make haste in, or we shall go without you. Now, Brandt."

But the valet declined to take his seat before his master. Leaholme laid his hand on the carriage-door nearest to him.

"There has been a division in the house," said Tom, his head taking the place Hester's white hat had vacated on the earl's approach, "and you belong to the other half."

"I know," he returned, quietly, "I was not coming in, but—are you comfortable, Miss Dyott? May I get you a book or anything?"

"Oh no, thank you. But please don't let the train go without you."

"No. Miss Bruce do you think of anything I can do?"

"I do, indeed."

"What is it?"

There was an eager gladness in tone and look.

"Let us start, please."

CHAPTER X.

BY THE RESTLESS WAVES.

"WHAT a dirty, crowded station, Lord Leaholme! Do let us get out of it as quickly as we can."

"But unfortunately, Miss Lane, that only means as slowly as we must."

"Well?" she asked, as Tom came up to the group.

"There's good fun outside," laughed Tom. "There is a large machine sent from the Queen's Hotel for the Earl of Leaholme's suite, and a brougham for himself, your fellow cannot make them understand that he is the only suite you have brought except a groom or two."

"Now, Tom," said his step-father. "Come along, Isabel. Come girls; that omnibus is engaged for us. 'Yrnteos House.' James, see that Taffy on the box understands."

"I suppose, Miss Bruce, you will require a saddle-horse?" said Leaholme, gravely.

"I think I will not mind," she answered, speaking as gravely as he had done, as she gathered her habit in her hand.

"It will not be a very long omnibus drive, Lyddy, so congratulate yourself," said Bella, tripping out of the station beside the earl. "Shall you very much mind it, dear?"

"No," said Lydia, standing before the door, "not very much; but it's a very common vehicle."

"Wait," said Tom, "till you feel it going up the street. A yacht off the Lizard is nothing to it."

"We shall have our own carriage after to-day," exclaimed Bella, consolingly, to Lydia and the lookers-on.

"I should like to walk, Lydia," said Hester, very low, as she stood and looked hesitatingly into the omnibus.

A little pause, and then Lord Leaholme asked, in his clear, distinct tones, "Do you all prefer driving? I am going to walk. May I take charge of any one?"

Bella had taken her seat, and Lydia was following; so no one answered.

Take care of the step, Miss Dyott. Allow me."

Poor Lydia's heavy figure plunged in instantly, then tripped over Bella's dress, and came clumsily down into Mrs. Paley's lap.

"It certainly does not look attractive within. You will prefer walking, Miss Bruce?"

"I am only waiting for Lydia to sit down," answered Hester, looking at him with great nonchalance from under her white feather. "How could I walk in my habit?"

"Very easily," he replied, below his breath, as he stood back; "but it is better so, perhaps."

"I suppose your dinner will await you, Lord Leaholme; but do look in afterward, and taste our sea-side tea; will you?" entreated Mrs. Bruce. "Yrnteos House is very near the Queen's."

"Thank you. Yes, I will come."

A few minutes afterward the unwieldy-looking conveyance passed him as he walked up the narrow street.

"He has not come a day too soon, I think," began Mrs. Paley; "he neither looks nor walks as he used."

"I wish I looked as strong," said Tom, bending his slight form to look out upon the tall, well-knit figure which they had passed, while Bella waved her hand.

At their own door they were met by their own servants, and within they found everything comfortably unpacked and prepared. Dressing at once, they met in the bow-windowed dining-room, which looked out on the parade at the sea, and dined very merrily indeed that first evening, in anticipation of the pleasant weeks to come.

Tea was spread in the cheerful drawing-room up-stairs, the windows open to receive the fresh sea-air and the music of the band which was playing a little lower down on the parade.

They were all grouped as near the window as possible, except Mrs. Paley, who lay half asleep on a couch, and Bella, who had begun to prepare the tea immediately on seeing Lord Leaholme leave the hotel. She looked quite pretty in her light-blue grenadine, with the blue bows in her fair hair; but she was eager and conscious, as she listened for the step on the stairs, and she made Lydia the recipient of various exclamations; as that young lady, looking taller and bigger than usual in her stiffly frilled white dress, sat leaning with her elbows on the table, watching her.

Mr. Bruce lounged in the window, the picture of lazy enjoyment; his wife, on an easy-chair near him, looked, now down on the passers-by, now into a room to exchange a remark with Bella.

Tom, from his position half through the window, glanced up at Hester as she leaned against the side of it, in her pretty, simple mourning dress of lavender crape, her beautiful hair dressed daintily, but without a ribbon or ornament of any sort.

"I believe you have been in a dream, Hester, ever since we came in sight of the sea. You were only half awake all dinner-time."

"I seldom eat so heartily in my sleep, Tom; but I don't know how it is, the sight of the sea is like the sight of the face of a dear old friend from whom——"

"From whom?" questioned Tom, gently, rising from his indolent position as she paused.

"From whom I parted—in sorrow," she answered, blushing a little, but too proud to stop because now Lord Leaholme stood within hearing.

"Then you love it?" asked Tom, softly.

"Dearly—dearly, as I must love a friend from whom I *could* part in sorrow."

"I have never known that sort of parting yet."

"You are anticipating the event, I suppose, Tom," said his step-father, looking pleasantly into his frank, blue eyes.

Lord Leaholme glanced at Hester with a half smile on his lips, lightly answering a question of Bella's.

"Do I love the sea, Miss Lane? Of course I do. Does it not provide me various luxuries, without which life would want its relish?"

They gathered merrily round the tea-table, with old-fashioned ceremony and cordiality; and as the twilight deepened,

and the shadows crept in among them, the music came softly in among them, too, with an old familiar melody which entered all their hearts in different ways.

Bella jumped up at last, and danced around to the window, humming the air, and Tom asked Lydia if she felt inspired, too, and wanted a partner.

Hester drew back a little, for she felt the tears—hot, sad tears—well up in her eyes. There was somehow a sorrowful, gray loneliness filling her heart like the gray, sorrowful loneliness of the sea itself; and the sweet, well-known air came wistfully and pleadingly upon it, like a voice from that long ago when there had been no lonely shadowy spot in all her life. She could not keep those silly tears away; she could not join in the merriment, so she crept to her own room; but it looked out upon the backs of other houses, and Hester perversely longed to look upon the sea. She went softly down-stairs and stood at the door, a large crimson shawl thrown over her thin dress. The bandsmen put up their instruments and went away. There was hardly any one about now, and she ran across the esplanade, and, leaning on the iron rails, stood silent there, the notes of the beautiful air still ringing in her head to the mightier, grander music of the waves.

As she lingered so, they wondered in the house behind her (where the gas was lighted and the blinds were drawn) why Hester had gone to bed so suddenly; and her uncle said it was a sensible thing, for she had looked very tired all the evening.

The waves followed each other in, tossing, foaming, almost to Hester's feet, and she watched them in a long, long dream. Some one had said the sea was rough to-night, yet how softly, smoothly, and gently it came on, until, met by the shelving beach, it broke and fell with a laugh and sparkle. If the moon were only shining now, she fancied how grand it would be—how pure and spotless would the white foam look as it danced below her. But, beautiful as it was here close beside her, her eyes would wander to that sad, gray, level line far off—slowly being swallowed up now, she was thankful to see, in the gloom of the night.

She walked on, trying to still this fanciful restlessness. When she stopped again, she saw, on the beach below her, a figure which she recognized in a moment. She gazed down, carelessly, picturing the look she knew to be upon his face,

then fell back to her rambling thoughts once more; noting nothing of Lord Leaholme save that the lighted end of his cigar made a pleasanter, cheerier break in the gray monotony than did the flickering lights upon the shore—a warmer, firmer, healthier little light, she thought. Then she rested her cool hands upon the rails, and forgot all about him; while he stood motionless upon the shore, looking (as some of us cannot help looking when we watch the ocean in its wide and fathomless mystery) into his own heart, and seeing its future misty and obscure as the darkening, fading waters—seeing but one hope in all its vague and dim immensity, and seeing that one hope dashed and broken into fragments, as the white foam broke below him.

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

“I CAN see no fun in picking our way any further among these great stones, Lydia. Let us go back to the parade.”

Lydia had been for some time steering her way with difficulty over the huge stones and pieces of rock round Boulder Point; planting her foot each time with such elaborate care that, as a natural consequence in such a case, the foot slipped, and Lydia tottered for a moment, then came down on her outstretched palms. Taking this into consideration, she was not sorry to hear Bella’s proposal: and, being too much out of breath by her last attempt to be able to make herself heard, she looked round with a relieved nod. Bella burst into one of her long laughs.

“You are not particularly sylph-like, Liddy dear, but it was yourself who proposed coming here.”

“I proposed it,” said Hester, stepping lightly down from the height above, and hastening to Lydia. “Let us try how we get on together; it is awkward for one alone.” Not that she had found it so at all, but she took the little fact on trust when she looked into Lydia’s flushed face.

“Let us come back,” said Bella, just as Lydia had deposited her hand in Hester’s arm. “Come back.”

“Oh, yes, if you like,” said Lydia, drawing her arm away and turning anything but regretfully; “but you told the gentlemen we should be at Boulder Point.”

"They will soon find us out," replied Bella, with a toss of her head; "besides, we shall meet them. Come along. I suppose you will go on, Hester; climbing appears to be a weakness of yours."

"Yes, one of many," said Hester, merrily. "You will not mind if I go on with the children, will you?"

Miss Lane laughed.

"Not a bit; we all do just what we like here."

The two girls turned away, and Hester resumed her climbing.

"Go slowly," said Bella, "then we shall meet them, and Tom can help you over this rough place. I should fancy Hester will find it dull over there with only the little boys; she cannot meet anybody she knows here, because it strikes me she knows nobody. Aren't you glad the Berkeley's are here? Not that I care for Marian Berkeley so much as for you, Lyd; but they are so stylish, and hold so good a position, and I like our friends to be nice, you know, especially now that Lord Leaholme is here, and so much with us. But oh, Lydia, what do you think? Who do you think I saw this morning as I came from bathing?"

"I have not the slightest idea," answered Lydia, who never had any slight ideas to spare.

"I do not see why I should really mind," resumed Bella, vaguely; "for, of course, she and I have nothing to do with each other now. If she comes and tries to claim acquaintance, I have forgotten her entirely; so have you, please to remember."

"But who is it, Bell?"

"That Miss Goldsmith, who was junior teacher at Lorne House; do you remember her?"

"Oh, yes; I remember her well."

"It is very provoking that one should be subject to these *contretemps*; that is the evil of school-life."

"But we met Marian Berkeley first at school."

"That has nothing to do with it," retorted Bella, sharpness always serving for argument with Lydia's inconvenient remarks. "One does get mixed up with people one does not care to mix with, and it is very awkward for a girl."

"So it is," said Lydia, readily; "but we need not look at Miss Goldsmith, if we *do* meet her."

"I wish she were not here at all, though," snapped Bella. "Those sort of people ought not to come in the very height

of the season. There they are!" she cried, in a different tone. "Pa is going in, and Lord Leaholme and Tom are coming on here."

"Lydia did not enjoy the scrambling round Boulder Point," she said, smiling as they met, "so I have brought her back to a smooth surface."

"Where is Hessie?" asked Tom, who took no trouble to conceal his frank, boyish sensations; and gayly and pleasantly showed before all the world his admiration for Hester—which admiration Bella never discouraged.

"We left her over there among the rocks, tumbling about and pretending she liked it. Lord Leaholme, do you know that the Berkeleys of Berkeley Park are here? They are old friends of yours. Of course, *you* know them."

He bowed slightly, as they stood where they had met.

"Why do you not answer?" she inquired, wondering why he neither spoke nor offered to turn with her.

"You asked me nothing, Miss Lane?"

"I did. I asked you if you did not know the Berkeleys."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I understood you to say, of course, I knew them."

"Do you know them?"

"We have met very often," he answered, lightly laughing.

"I have dined, and danced, and discoursed with Miss Berkeley, but I know little of her."

"Why? I believe you are thinking of something else."

His eyes were looking away over Boulder Point, but they came back to her face with a comical gravity. "I was thinking of a poor old fellow I saw at Llanforda this morning, looking for the *Osmunda* where there was nothing but bracken within a dozen miles; he agreed with me that it improved the rocks and hillside, but he did not gather it to study."

"But you have not answered my question yet?"

"I think I have. Where were you going?"

"We were going to the parade, answered Bella, hesitatingly. "Shall you go on?"

"First I shall see you safely over the shoals and pitfalls that lie between here and the parade."

They turned and walked back together, while Tom made his way on toward Hester, treading carefully and deftly over the sharp stones on the beach.

"Lord Leaholme," said Bella, speaking rather excitedly, just as they came up to a little cluster of strangers, "before

we leave, we must make up a little picnic to Gloddva. It will be delicious. Shall we?"

"Certainly. I shall enjoy it excessively."

"It will be so pleasant, won't it?"

"Very, if we are pleasant people. The place is very beautiful, though it is empty now, and shut up."

"And—has a curse on it," put in Lydia, timidly.

"Does that little ethereal appendage improve it, then, Miss Dyott?"

"Indeed, I think it makes it more interesting," Bella answered for her. "It is an earl's place, you know."

"Is that why a gloomy anathema is suspended over it?"

"Now, the idea of such a question from you! Let us turn again—do. And Lord Leaholme," added Bella, rather loudly, as they turned to avoid the same group, "the picnic is a settled thing, is it?"

"Miss Dyott," he said, leaning over Bella, and speaking rather low and gravely, "who is the young lady we have just passed, with two elderly ladies?"

Lydia blushed and hesitated, but Bella popped to the rescue.

"Why should poor Lydia know her, Lord Leaholme? She is some visitor; there are hundreds of them here who are not exactly ladies. Why should we know her?"

"I fancied you did not look at her, Miss Lane, as I did not presume that *you* knew her. Miss Dyott might have done so. We passed her twice, and each time she glanced at you both as—as no lady does unless she knows the person at whom she looks."

"No; but I do not suppose she *is* much of a lady," smiled Bella.

"She is very small, but not quite small enough to be unobservable. Miss Dyott," he said, as again they reached the turn to the shore; "perhaps, with my assistance, you could manage the transit across the point now."

"Oh, yes, without it," she replied, quickly. "It was not so bad as all that. You help Bella, please."

"I have two hands," he said, ignoring Bella's silent acceptance of the proposal, "and both are accustomed to service."

And both performed it, the help which both girls required being given readily and effectually; the light, unwavering step as firm among the rocks as on the pebbly beach.

Presently, at a sudden turn, they came upon Hester standing against the gigantic and almost perpendicular cliff, and looking out to sea, while Tom lay on the beach below her. She turned when she heard them, and roused herself nervously.

"If you had found me a seat, Tom," she said, "it would have been but natural. It is very tiring to stand forever."

"I begged you to sit," cried Tom, springing up. "I will find you a seat. Oh, bother, here are all the girls!"

Hester laughed.

"That reminds me of school, Tom."

"Never mind being reminded of school; I know you hated it."

"You must decidedly go back to college, Tom; you do not know everything yet."

"Yes, I must unfortunately go back to K.; but it will be very hard *this* time. Lydia the Adventuress, how did you manage the passage of the Rubicon?"

"Very well," said Lydia, good-humoredly. "Bella, is not this a good place to rest?"

And Bella, though she would fain have passed, could find no excuse to do so.

They had been for some time lounging on the rocks in various attitudes, and had made several short peregrinations after the treasures of the deep, when there suddenly turned the corner to them a little girl of about eleven years old—a tall, delicate-looking child, who seemed equally to have outgrown her strength and her shabby little frock. She darted toward Tom, who was standing a little way apart, with his back to her, then drew back with a quick, shy flush.

"Oh! I thought it was Hugh," she began, then made another start to him: "and so it—*isn't*," for Tom turned his face at that moment.

She shrunk back in painful confusion, standing there alone in her nervous bewilderment, until a young lady joined her—a small, gentle-looking girl, in a plain blue-gingham dress and unfeathered hat. She smiled as the child clung to her, noticing no one else; but Lord Leaholme glanced curiously at Bella. She had bent down her head, searching among the stones; Lydia looked constrained and uneasy. As he watched them, rather amused, he heard a glad, low cry; and in a moment he saw Hester Bruce stand before this quiet little stranger, take both her hands eagerly, and look down into her

face with an expression which certainly *he* had never seen before in the tender, passionate eyes.

"Pollie, Pollie!" cried the glad young voice, "is it really you? Oh, Pollie, if you only knew how I have longed for you! How I have thought of you and loved you all these years! Kiss me of your own free will, like you used. You never in your life turned away from little Hessie. Kiss me."

And Pollie Goldsmith raised her head and kissed her, just as she had done when she used to take the little face she loved in her hands in those old times when it was *she* who had to stoop.

"This *is* pleasant," said Hester, presently, with a long-drawn breath. "Bella, you did not know Pollie, did you?"

"Who do you mean by Pollie?" asked Bella, without turning.

"Oh! I forgot. I beg your pardon, Pollie, for being so heedless," said Hester, her face flushing brilliantly, but for Bella, not herself, however much she might pretend. "You and Bella had so many other friends," she explained turning to Lydia, with perfect composure, "that it is not surprising that one has not lived in your memory quite as she has lived in mine. I had *no* friend at school like Miss Goldsmith."

Then the poor child turned again to Pollie, and tried to obliterate the memory of the distant bows with which Bella and Lydia had received her little speech, nervously wishing all the time that they had not come back, or that she had the right to introduce Pollie to the gentlemen. With her ready tact she talked on, while this ran in her head.

"Is Mrs. Goldsmith here, Pollie?"

"Yes, she and Aunt Phyllis are sitting on the beach with their books. I am going on a little farther with Tottie."

"A little friend of yours, Pollie? Introduce me to her."

"Tottie," said Pollie, gently laying her hand on the child's thin shoulder. "Miss Bruce wants to know your name. It is too long for me to say."

"Tottie," answered the child, gravely, raising a pair of serious dark eyes to Hester's face, "only it's really Henrietta Delahoyde."

"That is very long," said Hester, shaking her head. "Mine is much shorter. It is only Hester Bruce. Have you ever heard it before?"

"No, never. It is pretty."

"If she is a very old friend of yours, Pollie," said Hester making a very little emphasis on the "very old," though she looked wistfully into Pollie's face, "I am sorry she has never heard my name from your dear lips."

"Not a very old friend," said Pollie, with an inexplicable blush; "I never knew Tottie until we came here a week ago. Did I, Tottie?"

"No," answered the child, "nor Hugh."

It was just then, as Pollie's nervous blush rose gradually again, that Lord Leaholme put aside a certain long thought that had been engrossing him while he watched the wondrous change which showed him Hester's face in a new light; and in the easy, chivalrous manner which sat so winningly upon him, stood beside Bella, and spoke to her in a low, courteous tone, which was plainly distinct to all.

"Miss Lane, you are unkind to me not to introduce me to your old school-friend. We may surely set aside ceremony out here upon the rocks, and an old friend of yours will pardon this bold request of mine."

To say that the rocks reeled under her, and that the earl seemed to her to be standing in the sky, would be but a faint description of the shock this speech gave Bella. That this girl in the dowdy hat and old-fashioned dress should be spoken of as an old friend of hers—should be spoken of so, too, by the very one in all the world whom she could last have wished to do it! For her, Bella Lane, to be appealed to to do her honor—appealed to even before that ridiculous child who had dragged this acquaintanceship to light—and to have her own falsehood brought back to her with such a home-thrust, from the very one for whose approval she had *acted* the falsehood, by passing this girl unrecognized just before!

These thoughts chased each other rapidly through Bella's brain, as she stood motionless, with an odd, hard stare on her face, the earl waiting.

It only lasted a few moments, after all; then Bella thought it best to pocket her pride a minute in his presence, and she began the form which to some she would have repeated so proudly.

"The Earl of Leaholme—Miss Goldsmith——"

She thought she could go no further, but a sudden thought struck her; a sudden change came into her voice. She would awe Pollie somewhat, and show her how far apart they really were.

"And this," she said, with a gay familiarity in her smile, and a playful touch on his arm, "is Miss Goldsmith, Lord Leaholme, to whom I used to say my lessons at school."

Bella had never seen him bow as he bowed then, nor ever remembered hearing the pleasant voice so courteous, or seeing the ready hand-shake so earnest.

Hester drew back, marveling to hear him, and rejoicing in Pollie's answers, shy and timid though they were.

"Miss Goldsmith," said Tom, following in his free, light way, the lead of Earl Leaholme, "I saw you once in my grandmother's house when I was a boy. May I presume upon that introduction now?"

And he, too, held his hand—his soft, ringed hand—to this unfashionable girl.

"Are you going back, Miss Lane?" asked Leaholme.

Perhaps he saw her sign to Lydia; perhaps he guessed the move would be desirable.

"Yes, it is tiring here," said Bella, with an effort at being at her ease. "Come, Lydia."

He joined them, to Bella's intense delight. Nothing could have pleased her more than showing her power of leading him away. She was jubilant all the way home, and the rocks rang with her prolonged laughter.

But if she imagined she had vexed the girls she left behind her, she was most lamentably mistaken. They felt that now, indeed, they could enjoy each other's society, for Hester thought little of Tom's presence; and Pollie, influenced by her, talked as freely and easily as if they had been alone. Presently little Tottie, with a glad exclamation, sprung to meet a young man who was advancing toward them—a young man of middle height, with a rather stern, thoughtful face, which struck you at once with its self-concentrated gravity, and won upon you imperceptibly by its earnestness and simplicity.

"Hugh," cried his little sister, "what a time you've been!"

Walking on, her hand in his, he halted beside Miss Goldsmith.

"Mrs. Goldsmith and Miss Robarts have left their seats," he said, "and are gone to walk. They will look for you home at tea-time if—as you kindly promised—you stay with Tottie. Has she been troublesome?"

Pollie very shyly and diffidently introduced this new-comer to Hester and Tom; and, after talking together for a few

minutes, Tom asked him if he had been any farther round the point.

"Not yet," he said—"not so far as this before to-day, as my little sister has not been able to climb about. Some are afraid of coming here at all, because it is covered at high water."

"That will be some six hours hence," laughed Tom; "but I want to know the meaning of a certain queer end of damaged rope dangling over the cliff. Will you come and see?"

They walked away together. The little boys took Tottie off again to dive after some curiosity they saw in one of the little green pools that glittered among the rocks, and Pollie and Hester were left alone at last.

"Mr. Delahoyde is a clergyman, Pollie?" questioned Hester, her eyes following the two gentlemen.

"Yes; we made acquaintance in the train. Mamma found out that he had been curate in the very parish where she and Aunt Phyllis were born. That seemed to be a sort of link between us. He has been obliged to give up his curacy now to bring his sister here. She has been very ill, and was ordered to the sea; so, as he could not get the holiday, he was obliged to give up the appointment. Such a poor one it is, mamma says."

"Has he another to go to?"

"No; he will have to look out for one, I suppose. He has no one in the world belonging to him but this little sister, and he is so fond of her, so good to her."

Something in Pollie's tone, some echo of the old tenderness which had been lavished on herself in the years gone by, broke the current of Hester's thoughts.

"Dear, it is so good to see your face again, to have you here. Oh, Pollie, be my friend as you used. Never be cold and distant to me, for I am very lonely, and I will try to do what you teach me now, more than I used."

The little governess looked up into the brave, beautiful face beside her, and the tears started at its sad, entreating gaze. Then she kissed it with a queer little hasty laugh.

"Hessie, my little darling of the old times, you have no idea what old times those are, nor what and where these new times find us."

"Do you feel them so changed, Pollie?"

"Yes, the times."

"And your heart?"

"My heart can never change in its old love for my favorite."

"And no friend will ever be to me what you have been, and are, and are going to be," said the girl, gently; "indeed, Pollie, I think I have no friend besides. May I come and see Mrs. Goldsmith?"

"If you will, you will find she knows you very well," Pollie answered, gladly.

"Thank you, Pollie, dear. That is like you. I only fear I shall be tempted to come too often. You must give me a gentle hint when that is the case. But, Pollie," she went on, after a pause, looking down curiously into her face, "you do not ask me anything. Ask me something—just that question about which you are——"

"I was only thinking, dear, about—Miss Lane."

"Yes, I thought so. I will answer the question you were wondering over. No, I do not like her any better, and I cannot, though I try. Yes, I do try, indeed—indeed, Pollie, and I try never to say a rude or unkind word to her; for, oh, there is so much sorrow in one's life, it seems terrible to add to each other's! I always dread, Pollie, that what I have known, others have either known, too, or will have to know some day; so I try not to give even a little unnecessarily, else I am just as hasty and thoughtless as I used to be. Is it any wonder that I am perpetually afraid of myself?"

"And your aunt?" asked Pollie, with a gentle kiss upon the childlike face.

"Oh! she—I do not know—I think she generally passes me by on the other side—if you understand."

"But Mr. Bruce?" began Pollie, a little tremulously.

"Uncle Alf is always very good to me, and very tender," she answered, not thinking at that moment of anything he could have been and was not.

Pollie was silent, and Hester went on with a laugh:

"And there is Tom, you mean to say. He is always pleasant—always as you have seen him now. When you have been with my cousin Tom for five minutes, you know him. I like Tom very much."

"Yes, dear," Pollie replied, rather absently, "and the Earl of Leaholme? He is a friend of—your uncle's, I suppose?"

"Yes; a friend of Uncle Alf's, and Bella's, and Mrs. Bruce's, and Tom's—oh, Tom tries to model himself on Lord Leaholme—and he lives at Leaholme Castle, in Warwick-

shire, and at Wye Abbey, near us, where I have never been, and am never going."

"Why?"

"Because I hate him."

"Hate him! Why?"

"Oh, Pollie, he is such a hypocrite!"

"A hypocrite! I am astonished. He is so very unlike that."

"No, he does not show it very much in his face," assented Hester, in a suppressed, angry voice, "nor in his words. But that makes it only all the worse."

"But how can that be, dear? I have never heard anything of the Earl of Leaholme but what has been noble and upright. By sight and hearsay, of course, we know him well in Birmingham."

"But you did not before he became Lord Leaholme."

"No," said Pollie, slowly; "did you?"

"Oh, don't let us talk of him," replied Hester, hurriedly. "Don't let him spoil everything for me, even this meeting with you, Pollie dear. Here they come."

CHAPTER XII.

HUGH DELAHOYDE'S CHARGE.

"HAVE you solved the mystery of the rope, Mr. Delahoyde?" asked Hester, with a bright smile for Pollie's friend.

"We think it must have been fixed there to save some one caught by the tide in that little bay. Why it should have been fastened at the top, instead of held, I do not know; but so it is. Since then it has broken—worn out, probably—not very far from the top; at least, comparatively near it."

"But no one could possibly climb there," said Hester, opening her eyes very wide at the thought.

"We have no idea what has been done, Miss Bruce; but, as far as I can judge, no one would attempt it *now*."

"The cliff seems almost perpendicular," said Tom, seating himself comfortably beside the girls. "I should never have guessed any use for the rope, unless Mr. Delahoyde had suggested it."

"You will sit here, too, will you not, Mr. Delahoyde?" asked Hester, moving a little, that he might seat himself

comfortably on Pollie's side as Tom had done on hers, though he was by no means so *au fait* at doing it. "I do not think that your sister and my cousins like to leave their search yet. Is not it pleasant to see a child's thorough enjoyment of the sea? Your little friend will soon find her roses again, Pollie."

"Yes, I think so."

"Miss Goldsmith is herself helping to bring them back," said Hugh, glancing at her gratefully. "Tottie would have had but a dull time of it with me alone."

"I consider the waves the universal playfellows here," said Pollie.

"Our boys are not content with them," said Tom; "they follow Hessie about like her shadows—people have two shadows, you know, according to Shakespeare."

"We lodge with a Miss Shakespeare," said Pollie.

"Have you perched upon a branch of the poet's family tree then, Miss Goldsmith?" asked a pleasant voice beside her, as Lord Leaholme slipped down coolly near Hester's feet.

"If so, it is a grafted one, my lord," she said, with a quiet twinkle in her eyes; "a little twig which can have by nature no connection with the parent stem. She is the oddest little old woman I ever saw."

"What does she do odd, Pollie?" asked Hester.

"Everything," replied Pollie, her nervousness vanishing in the presence of these pleasant companions. "It is a very small house, and has a very narrow stair case; but she thinks we lodgers ought never to tread on the carpet. Especially does she wage war against my poor little, unoffending dog."

"That curly little fellow with the children?" asked Leaholme, in a tone of ready interest.

"Yes, my lord. That is my terrier Roley, and he goes with me everywhere."

"Pollie, do you really mean to say you go *everywhere*?" inquired Hester, with great astonishment in her eyebrows.

"I mean that I take him with me whenever I do go anywhere, which is very seldom indeed. But Miss Shakespeare never sees us together without muttering audible complaints of 'dogs and other messes.' Mamma and I and Aunt Phyllis are the 'other messes,'" she continued, looking with delight into the amused faces round her. "When she first showed her strong objection to his stepping on the carpet, I ventured to tell her he had been accustomed to carpets, and appreciated them; but she would not listen. Then I tried to effect a

compromise, and asked if he might sit with her down-stairs. 'Not on any account,' she told me in a high scorn, 'he was much too grand; for she had no parlor—no, nor no carpet on it!'

Hester's soft, musical laugh was not the only one which greeted this speech of shy little Pollie's.

"Are you lodging on the parade, Miss Goldsmith, and you, Mr. Delahoyde?" asked Tom.

"No," answered Hugh, without any hesitation. "I am lodging in a small house in a small street of the town."

"I think we all seem to prefer a 'lodging on the cold ground!'" said Leaholme, vexed at Tom's blunt question.

"I hardly know what my rooms are like, though I could describe to you many comfortable spots among the rocks. Miss Bruce, have you any definite idea about your 'apartments?'"

"Only one," said Hester, readily taking his hint. "The window looks down upon a dusty square garden, belonging equally to us and our neighbors; and every night I see a light flitting about, and hear mysterious voices; and my spirit is vexed because I cannot find out the cause—whether they belong to the next door or to the spirit-world."

"What does it seem like?" asked Pollie, laughing.

"Exactly as if," replied Hester, lowering her voice to an awed whisper—"as if they murdered one of their lodgers every night, and buried the body by candlelight."

"I hope they will despatch the Berkeleys," put in Tom, laughing. "What a blessing for us that they have taken those rooms!"

"And only this morning you said it was a bore, Tom."

"But I did not know then the fate that awaited them," he said; "I was afraid we should have a month of their society."

"Bella says they will impart a new spirit to the place," said Hester, comically.

"A party spirit, then; for there will be nothing now but parties forever."

"I thought the night assemblies on the parade were the Aberswys parties," said Hugh; "surely they, with the dresses, and the band, and the promenading, must be the sea-side version of a party."

"Oh, it is great fun," laughed Tom. "Hessie, you will walk with me again to-night, won't you?"

"I have given up that honor to Miss Berkeley," said Hes-

ter, demurely. "I am engaged to Miss Goldsmith. May I be, Pollie?"

Pollie blushed up to her hair. "I do not generally walk on the parade at night," she said, slowly. "I—I do not care about it."

"Then we will walk somewhere else," answered Hester, readily; "anywhere you like, Pollie dear."

"Oh, no! Please go as usual—with—your party."

"I am not always with my party," she said, seriously, "as you see, Pollie."

Pollie glanced across at Tom.

"Oh! Hessie does not call *me* her party, I assure you, Miss Goldsmith," he said, merrily, shrugging his shoulders. "She looks upon me as a kind of hanger-on."

Then Pollie glanced back almost unconsciously at Lord Leaholme.

"I am a hanger-on-and-off, too, Miss Goldsmith," he said, gravely; "attaching myself to any party I find convenient, like the wise Vicar of Bray. If I ever join yours, shall you turn me away?"

"I was thinking," said Pollie, raising rather a deprecating face to Hester, "that Miss Lane and Miss Dyott would be sure to——"

Impulsively Hester bent and left a quick, gentle kiss on the hesitating lips.

"You think a great many things you ought not to think, little Pollie. If you are going to avoid me, you will have to look for other lodgings, for I will make Miss Shakespeare's life a burden to her, with my invasions of her neat territory. I will dance up and down her never-to-be-spotted carpet, and make a hopeless climax to the other messes."

"You will not know where to come," said Pollie, laughing a little.

"Oh, trust me. Besides," she added, with the greatest nonchalance, "I know Mr. Delahoyde will tell me, if I ask him politely."

"Yes," Hugh answered, "I would like to be the one to bring a further brightness to Mrs. Goldsmith's rooms."

"Mr. Delahoyde, you have soon found out Miss Bruce's character," said Tom, fondly touching the one long curl that hung upon her shoulder.

"I had a little help in making that discovery," answered

Hugh, while Hester shook away Tom's hand with an impatient flush.

Just then the children came up, and they all turned homeward together, still chatting and laughing merrily. When they had accomplished the difficult part again, and had left Boulder Point, they sat and rested once more, for it was hot and tiring among the rocks in the heat of the July day. A silver shimmer lay upon the sea, and the waves fell with a mellow plash upon the pebbles. They watched them rather silently, all quite still except the earl, who took up the little rounded stones that lay under his hand, and threw them into the water, sometimes listlessly rolling them in close to his feet, sometimes carefully aiming one under the bending crest of an approaching wave, sometimes eagerly scattering a whole handful to disturb the sparkling surface, then stopping suddenly and waiting, as a greater wave came on, rising and receding in a high slope from the shore again.

"Lord Leaholme," cried Alfie, coming up with Tottie, "will you let Miss Delahoyde come with us in our yacht sometimes?"

Hugh interposed nervously: but the earl laughed.

"Do let her come, Mr. Delahoyde. I should like to see whether little girls or little boys are more easily frightened by rocking in the cradle of the deep."

"We are not a bit frightened *now*," said Alfie, encouragingly; "shall you be?"

"I think I might just at first, but not after," replied Tottie, in her quaint, old-fashioned way.

"Especially if your brother will come too, to keep us steady, and if I promise to take great care of you."

"Pray do not speak of this, my lord," began Hugh, anxiously.

"Will you not allow us to have a sail together, then? And will you not lend me a helping hand? Come and see the yacht; it lies all ready."

They walked away together, and Pollie's eyes followed them.

"How kind it is of Earl Leaholme!"

"How forbidding it is of Mr. Delahoyde to consent so readily to be made s-i-c-k—poorly!" laughed Hester.

"He is very fond of sailing, I believe, and will think this a treat."

"And Lord Leaholme will get a pleasant companion."

"But he could have so many."

"He could have Lydia and Bella any day, eh, Hessie?" said Tom, with a little chuckle, "not to speak of others. Lord Leaholme is supposed to be the most valuable catch of the day, Miss Goldsmith."

"Don't talk in that way, Tom," pleaded Hester.

"I must instruct Miss Goldsmith in Herefordshire news. To continue, Miss Goldsmith, allow me to assure you there is not a girl in that county who would not do anything in a mild way to win the Earl of Leaholme and his estates."

"In winning one she naturally wins all, Tom, so you need not be so circumstantial."

"Hessie Bruce," he continued, "is the only exception to this rule (which includes my own sister, though I say it that shouldn't); and it is well for her that it is so. There would be angry passions rising against her, if she ventured to look upon him with favor."

"No wonder he is admired," assented Pollie, in her matter-of-fact simplicity, "he is so kind and considerate. Few in his station would have made Mr. Delahoyde feel at home as he has done, and been so pleasant and kind to me. There are many people, Hessie, aren't there? who can be gracious to the *poor*, never showing a vestige of pride to them: but very few are so bravely generous as to associate freely and kindly with those who, for aught they know, may presume upon the encouragement given."

"It seems a very despicable feeling," said Hester, slowly, "when we think how soon we must be made equal."

"But it is a natural and general feeling, too," answered Pollie, "and excusable. No one ever invented a middle title to cross the gulf between patrician and plebeian."

"Leaholme never makes any distinction of that sort," said Tom, warmly; "he is too high in every way for such a pride as that. Not because he is the first among us, the highest, richest, and most influential nobleman in his county, but because he is—what, Hessie? Help me out."

"Because he is inferior to all of them."

Tom laughed, thinking she was joking.

"Because—Miss Goldsmith, you know what I mean—his pride is a sort of humble pride, if you understand. He does not need others to sustain him on his height, but, because he is there, he wants to stoop and sustain others, of course knowing he himself cannot fall. I suppose," added Tom, reflectively, "that the Arundels of Wye are as old as the hills."

"Not quite so everlasting, I hope."

"Hessie, you are satirical to-day, dear," said Tom, smiling into her angry face; "you will not acknowledge any greatness in Leaholme."

"Yes, I will," she said, carelessly, as she rose; "I acknowledge that he makes even Mr. Delahoyde look short. I know he makes you look both short and small, Tom; yet, you are not either, exactly. And you are a—a—better friend to me than he is."

"Mr. Delahoyde must be more than middle height," said Pollie, looking at the two gentlemen as they advanced; "yet he *does* look insignificant now."

"Not a bit," replied Hester, quickly; "only rather—frail, and—clerical."

Pollie and Tom had to hide their laugh as best they could.

"Are you really going on the sea, then, Tottie?" asked Hester, bending her sweet, bright face to look under the broad-brimmed hat.

"Yes, really. Are you going, too?"

"No; I don't like the rocking."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes, dear—of feeling giddy."

"You do not look ill, like me," said the child; "does she Hugh?"

"No, not at all like you, dear," said her brother, quietly.

"Perhaps *you* will not look ill when you have been in the little ship," said Hester, gently taking Tottie's hand in hers, as they all walked on together.

When they stood to separate, she bent and kissed one pale little cheek, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Shall I come for you when the sea is ready for us?" inquired Leaholme, watching her curiously as she received Hester's kiss.

"I will be sure to be ready; and will you bring the pretty lady?"

"No; you must come here again to see her," he said, flushing a little.

"And when you come to see her, you will come to see me, too," whispered Hester, setting aside the praise to herself with a strange, wistful simplicity.

"Hugh," said the child, as they sauntered down the hot, narrow streets, "isn't she a great deal prettier than Miss Goldsmith?"

"Yes."

"But you like Miss Goldsmith, don't you, Hugh?"

"Could I help liking her for her kindness to my little pet?"

"The pretty lady was very kind to me, Hugh; she kissed me. Don't you like her, too?"

"The sweet sea-breezes are kind to you, too, dear, *and* kiss you," Hugh answered, softly touching one little cheek. "I like everything that brings the roses here; I may like both—in the same way."

"What were you saying then, Hugh?"

"Nothing worth repeating, pet."

"I wish she would come in the boat with us."

"Tottie," said her brother, a little sternly, "you must not ask Miss Bruce to go with you anywhere. I fancy she would do it if you did; and it would not be right for you to ask. You and I must walk together on our own quiet way. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, quite," said the child, naturally accustomed to take up readily any wish of her brother's. "She is different from you and me, isn't she?"

"Yes, pet," Hugh answered, more gently now, "and never let 'you and me' forget that difference."

Tottie did not quite understand the whole of his meaning, but she pondered it in her mind, until they entered their small, stiff parlor, and she had taken her place sedately, standing before the big, bare tea-tray. Hugh, standing opposite her, repeated clearly and gravely, a short, simple grace.

"Are you ever so hungry again to-day, Hugh?" asked Tottie, earnestly, as he spread the honey on her bread.

"Ravenous; are you, pet?"

"Yes, Hugh; I always am here. The minute I go out I am hungry again."

Her brother's smile had a touch of sadness in it as he passed her her plate.

"Try that, and remember not to put any sugar in my tea, please."

"Oh, I nearly forgot again!" And the tiny finger dived for the lump which lay at the bottom of the unfilled cup, in too much haste to recollect the existence of tongs. "You see, you used to like sugar till we came here, Hugh, and of course I forget such a funny fancy."

"Of course you do, dear. Never mind; your memory will soon grow, like everything else about you."

"My frocks grow very short, don't they, Hugh?"

"Or you grow very long. Which is it, I wonder? Will they untuck, or unhem, or something? Let me see."

Gravely getting down from her seat, the child examined the turnings of the scanty linen skirt, Hugh anxiously looking over her; but neither of the two busy, serious eyes found any superfluous material.

"No, there's nothing to come down, is there, Hugh? But oh, it doesn't matter a bit! Now your tea is getting cold."

"We will not mind while this warm sun shines, Tottie," said her brother, gently; "but, as the winter comes on, we must have the dresses longer, and bigger, and wider, or fuller, or whatever you call it."

"Thank you, Hugh; but—can we afford it?"

"Why not, pray?" laughed Hugh, whose one ambition was to keep his poverty hidden from this little anxious, nervous child. "I should think we can, indeed."

"And you'll have new warm coats?"

"Yes, dear, exactly as many as I want. Now this is ready for you."

"Oh! I have eaten all that, and you've never begun. Where is yours, Hugh?"

"On my plate, you little mole."

"Oh, Hugh, don't eat dry bread. Why haven't you got butter or honey on it?"

"I don't know how it is," mused Hugh, "but I have taken a dislike to this butter—it is too sweet; more your sort of flavor; more for babies, you know. I think the bread is too good to be spoiled."

"Then why don't you have honey, Hugh?"

"It takes all the taste out of my tea. Is not it sad, pet, to have such a fidgety brother?"

"I shall buy you a cake, to-morrow, Hugh. I have that fourpenny-piece you gave me."

"If you buy it you will have to eat it, little lady."

"Do grown-up men *never* eat cakes, Hugh?"

"Never."

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE CROWD.

IN the fair, sweet summer evening the sea lay idly listening, and echoing, in soft, mellow, rippling notes, the music that trembled over it from the temporary gallery on its shore, where the bandsmen, in glittering uniform of blue and gold, amused the thousands who walked backward and forward below them; over whose lightest words the glamor of the music threw a charm all its own. A motley crowd it was; brilliant, lazy, happy. Thus upon the surface; below that as impenetrable as the sullen, fathomless sea itself. There is a great deal of gazing and criticizing countenanced at the sea-side, more so than in Hyde Park itself, hard as that may be to credit, on a May afternoon; but one group that night received and met the longest gazes and the freest criticisms of all.

Sauntering, chatting, listening, the multitude passed and repassed.

"Surely," decided an old lady in a Bath-chair, with a stationary eye-glass on her thin, sharp nose, "that *is* the Earl of Leaholme; a very splendid-looking man, and worthy one of the oldest peerages in England. That little springy thing walking close to him must be Isabel Lane's daughter. I remember her mother, the laziest and handsomest flirt in London. Always one of your silent, quiet flirts was Isabel Paley."

Still sauntering, chatting, listening, the crowd passed and repassed.

"Those are the people I spoke to you about," said a girl's voice from a cluster of young figures, "the people who have Yrnteos House. Does not that girl with the beautiful hair look just like a picture?"

"Rather vague, that," replied the young man spoken to. "I have seen every sort in a picture."

"The lady with the wavy, light hair must be engaged to the tall, handsome gentleman, as she always walks with him. Who is he, I wonder?"

"That is the Earl of Leaholme, little goose! Fancy not having picked that fact up yet!"

"Oh, is it? That other is a very nice-looking fellow, too, in his way, but nothing out of the common—the fair gentleman in gray."

Still sauntering, chatting, listening, the multitude passed and repassed; and presently there came lounging up a tall, indolent-looking gentleman of five or six and forty, with a lined, hard face, a long, red mustache, and whiskers (rather less red), hanging in a point down each shoulder like the ends of an unfastened comforter.

"By Jove!" he muttered to himself, with his cigar between his teeth, and an almost imperceptible start and turn, "it strikes me that life at the sea-side is composed of awkward encounters. Meeting that girl this morning put me out ridiculously. What on earth is she doing here? She ought not to be able to figure here in the season. Then, after that, to find out that Leaholme was at the hotel. And as if that were not enough, to see him now with the very lady whom I have been trying to follow all day. Confound him, how I detest him!—more than ever to-night. Is she anything to him, I wonder, or is the other idea possible? Maybe, for she is certainly with the Bruces. Ah! there comes Miss Berkeley. I am not inclined to join you yet, my dear young lady. I cannot raise my mind to the altitude of your tastes and ideas just yet. I must therefore turn aside in time."

Turning aside in time brought him face to face with another group—a quiet and unfashionable one; yet it occasioned him a start, which he cleverly hid as he made a path for himself in the crowd.

"That was entertaining," he muttered, a sinister smile raising the heavy mustache; "but here is my reward. I must have another look. I do not believe I ever saw a face so winning in all my life. It is an unexpected treat to come across anything so fresh and beautiful; an undeserved one, too, I have no doubt. I shall be obliged, after all, to renew my old acquaintanceship with Leaholme. I would do anything to get a good look into those glorious eyes. What a quiet grace there is about her! That's a weak lad walking beside her—spoony, too; both facts patent in his face. He would be Bruce's step-son, I take it; so he will be the fellow for me to cultivate. Leaholme does not seem spoony; he never did take much to the sex, except in a sort of general way; always had odd notions about women—notions that would plague me sorely. I hope he keeps them now; I would rather he was

not in the field against me. I must do it, I suppose, though it goes rather against the grain to renew that friendship which was so remarkably ardent between us, and was cemented so amiably by that little affair in the jungle. Pshaw! any man would have done what he did. I see no cause to grovel before him for that. I would not go near him if I thought the Berkeleys would introduce me to her; but the fair Marian would not relish being asked to introduce me to a more attractive girl. So I will not vex her, but manage as I can, and make use of his lordship if I must. It is a very curious thing," ruminated Sir Randall Platt, swinging his cane lazily. "how one slight fact can change the whole bearing of a case. Now Leaholme, being of my own sex, sinks immeasurably in my esteem by being supposed to be a fine-looking, handsome fellow; while the other, being a woman, seems worthy of all admiration because she is lovely and attractive. Odd things we men are in our reasonings."

And Sir Randal, stopping a friend at that moment, slapped him on the shoulder with a harsh and ugly laugh, which had more to do with the late thought than the present encounter; and which struck discordantly on Hester's ear as she passed.

"A note out of tune," she said to Tom.

"Was it, dear? I did not detect it. I like the band."

"So do I. It was not in the band. Stand here a moment, Tom, while I forget it."

"How lazy you two are!" exclaimed Bella, impatiently, fearing the others were about to stop too. "It is awfully stupid to stand all the while. Lord Leaholme, do let us go on."

"I should like to walk on, too," began Lydia. "Will you come, Tom?"

"If Hessie——",

But Hester interrupted him, wilfully misunderstanding.

"No, indeed, I do not mind being left. I shall like to rest quietly here a little, while you go."

Tom raised his eyebrows behind Lydia, but walked on beside her.

Presently Hester, looking thoughtfully among the faces in the crowd, caught sight of one she knew, not in the crowd exactly, but passing it on the other side. She crossed toward it quickly.

"At last!" she said, joyfully slipping her hand through Pollie's arm; "you must have avoided me all the evening,

for I have hunted you everywhere. Even my little new friend never came within sight," she went on, as she greeted Tottie Delahoyde with a highly injured expression.

No one denied the avoidance, or explained its motive; and poor little Hester, in her humility and loneliness, misunderstood the silence. But she let no one guess the pain this gave her, while they watched her bright, glad greeting to Mrs. Goldsmith; nor how difficult it was to speak the genial words, with those unshed tears rising in her throat and eyes.

"Mrs. Goldsmith, do you know that Pollie requires such ceremonious observances from me because we are in a fashionable place, that she does not allow me to come and call on you until I can find out what is considered the most aristocratic hour in Aberswys. Under those circumstances, and without a dog, do you think Miss Shakespeare will admit me?"

Mrs. Goldsmith, a stout, pleasant, warm-hearted old lady, looked at her with a little bewildered smile, wondering at the quaint familiarity and the shy deference. But it was a smile, and a pleasant, appreciating one, too; and the young heart that was craving for love and sympathy acknowledged it in a moment with a joyful beating.

"If I could have my own way," Hester resumed, with a stern glance down at Pollie, "I should have popped on you at some odd times now and then when I felt Shakespearean; and I should have made myself out to be an old friend of Pollie's happier with her than I have been for a long, long time. But she will not let me, Mrs. Goldsmith; she says I must come formally, bringing a card-case and all complete."

Mrs. Goldsmith's face was a picture of amusement, as she touched Hester's glove with one warm, soft hand, in which there seemed to be no such thing as bone.

"Never mind Pollie, Miss Bruce; she is full of whims and fancies. Come just once and try her; come as you spoke of coming."

"With my card-case?"

"No; as you said you should like to come. You will soon be able to judge how Pollie likes it. My dear, I think there is nothing in the world would give her more pleasure than such a visit from the favorite, of whom she has told me so much that I feel as if I knew and loved her, too."

"There, little Miss Pollie," said Hester, bending to her a pair of laughing eyes, in which the tears seemed very near

the surface. "Now, I hope you feel discomfited. I am invited by the mistress of the house. If you object, you will have to take refuge with Roley in that parlor which does not exist, and on which there is at present no carpet. May I come to tea to-morrow?"

Pollie laughed happily as she arranged it.

"I hope I shall not bore you by joining you too often," Hester continued, with a change in her voice. "I may so easily do it, seeing that those hours will be the brightest bits of my Aberswys time."

"Miss Bruce, this is Aunt Phyllis," said Pollie, with great shyness, as a tiny old lady with bright pink in her bonnet-cap, and a young, cheerful face, which almost made the crisp gray curl on each cheek look out of character, came up to them with Mr. Delahoyde. "Miss Roberts I ought to say, I suppose."

Miss Roberts stared rather curiously at the beautiful girl who seemed to be so friendly with Pollie; then blushed a rosy, wintry blush when she found herself chatting away quite easily and comfortable with her; even beginning to fancy they must have known each other for some time.

"Come, Tottie," said Hugh, quietly, "say good-night."

"Oh, no," began Miss Roberts, eagerly, "I have selfishly kept you to myself all this time, Mr. Delahoyde. Do give Tottie the enjoyment of the band with you a little now."

"She has been enjoying it all the evening, Miss Roberts," he said, flushing oddly as he watched his little sister talking to Hester—a smile of pleasure on the pinched, white face as the child gazed up with that nameless fascination which children always feel for a face that is beautiful with tenderness and love.

"Phyllis cannot appreciate the music unless she is close to it," said Mrs. Goldsmith to Hester, "so Mr. Delahoyde has been taking care of her there near the orchestra. Pollie and I prefer it at a little distance."

"At a great distance, I think, Mrs. Goldsmith, considering how far my eyes have traveled in vain to-night. Where have you been all the evening?"

"Most of the time sitting on the beach under the wall."

"That was why I could not find you. Now, Mr. Delahoyde, please persuade them to come and show this retired spot to you and me, that we may be able to find them another time. I believe Tottie knows it, too."

His whole face brightened at her thoughtful way of including them, and they turned together, strolling past the loiterers on the Parade. On their way back they took possession of a vacant seat in a quiet part; and here, half an hour afterward, Lord Leaholme came up to them, with Bella on his arm, Tom and Lydia following lazily. Without taking her hand away, Bella stood opposite Hester, ignoring the presence of any one else save Pollie, to whom she bowed distantly. She had stopped because he did. She bowed to Pollie because he shook hands; but she felt that even that concession was a most condescending one on her part, made up to her slightly by the spice of enjoyment with which she felt how these dull friends of Hester's must be dazzled by the little lady in blue silk and white festooned over it, whose attendant knight was an earl, and who looked so thoroughly at her ease beside him! Surely they must feel their own dowdiness and insignificance. Bella's lips wore a complacent smile as this thought shaped itself to her pleasantly. She stood toying with her delicate white silk parasol; cold and stiff in spite of her smile; her eyes rising and falling ceaselessly; her ribbons fluttering even in the soft, still summer air; no repose within a yard of her.

"You do not enjoy the band a bit," she said, pettishly; "it is quite wasted on you, Hessie."

"We do not all of us enjoy in quite the same way, perhaps," answered Hester, quietly.

"I should not like to do so in the way you do, when you enjoy—as you told me last night—staring about you in the crowd."

"Yes, and so I do."

Bella laughed.

"A nice taste, surely."

"Pray what do you enjoy, then, Bella, all the hours you walk up and down there?" inquired Tom, rather angrily.

"Why, the beautiful evening, of course, and the music—when they play anything pretty—and hearing talk."

"Your own?"

"Certainly not," she answered, with a smiling glance up at Lord Leaholme, who had turned a little aside, and was making an appointment with Tottie.

"I envy you, my lord," said Tom, laughing. "Your discourse rivals all the charms which poor, deluded Hessie is supposed to be capable of finding all along this coast."

"Is that 'Lebewohl of Proch's'—so much mellow from here than from where we have been—included, Lane?"

"I am glad you think it mellow here. Bella thinks we can hear and see nothing from here."

"I was not speaking of that," said Bella, vexed, "but of Hessie's ludicrous taste. Did you hear it, Lord Leaholme?"

"No; I did not, indeed."

"She actually enjoys staring about her in the crowd as much as anything in the world."

"Hold hard, Bella," laughed Tom. "She never said that."

"She did; did she not, Lydia?"

"I did not hear, but I do not enjoy it," answered Lydia, delighted at being able to indorse even an implied opinion of Bella's.

"I forget whether I said that, but I do enjoy it," said Hester, quietly, "particularly at night, unromantic and tiring as you may think it. It is intense enjoyment to me to weave out stories of my own about the faces that I meet; to guess what joys may be coming for them, what heart-burnings passed. To make pictures of the separate groups, and wonder how differently these groups will be clustered in a little time—in the very next summer, perhaps. To guess to whom this sea-side life is fresh and new, and to whom it is a wearying old routine. Sometimes," continued Hester, flushing a little, "I see a short, bright, sudden poem acted under my very eyes. Don't laugh, Tom; you cannot understand, I dare say, how this can be one of my enjoyments; but it is, and always has been since—since the lives of others have had more interest in them than my own."

"I hope that has never been," began Tom, anxiously; but she avoided his glance, and pointed out to sea, with a laugh that had a low ring of pain in it.

"How ghost-like the little white boats look out there!"

"Much prettier, don't you think, than they look in full daylight?" said Pollie, shyly breaking her silence.

"As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean," said Tom, "and I think that's about the most painfully motionless idea possible."

"They have a dream-like, unreal look, which painted ships could never have, I think," said Hugh.

"Yet there is a thorough reality in them, too," answered Leaholme, thoughtfully, "like haunting memories that have no longer power to pain or please."

"Haunting memories have always power to pain or please." They must have," said Hester, impetuously.

"Not always," he answered, calmly. "I hope to prove some day that even bitter memories may lose their sting."

"To whom do you hope to prove this?"

They all looked wonderingly at her as she asked this question, with a passionate eagerness in her low voice; but he only answered, a little sadly:

"To myself, Miss Bruce."

She rose with a look of relief, and gradually the others followed her example; all, except the two old ladies, grouping near the rails of the parade, and looking over the sea as the twilight closed in softly and lingeringly. Such a calm and cloudless night it was, that they could not help but feel the calm in their own hearts.

"Lord Leaholme," presently broke in Bella, whose eyes and ears were wandering, "is this gentleman who is coming toward us a friend of yours?"

They turned to look simultaneously, and over one or two of the faces an odd look passed. Long afterward Hester remembered the strange peace that had been around them all, deepening with their quiet, thoughtful words, when this man came among them.

"No, no friend of mine, Miss Lane," replied Leaholme, in a proud, quiet tone; "but I know him."

"I say, Leaholme," whispered Tom, "is not this Sir Randal Platt? Berkeley showed him to me from their windows. Introduce me, will you?"

"No," answered the earl, a puzzled frown upon his face as he looked quickly from Sir Randal to where Hester and Pollie stood close together.

CHAPTER XIV.

CRAFT AND COURAGE.

"POLLIE," whispered Hester, eagerly, "what is the matter? Do you know this ugly gentleman?"

"I know him!" laughed Pollie, with her eyes upon the advancing figure. "Why, and how, and where should I have met Sir Randal Platt, as Mr. Lane calls him?"

Hester, looking curiously into the gentle, smiling face, saw that the smile and ignorance were acted, but she only said;

"I am always having fancies that turn out unreal."

And her eyes followed Sir Randal, as he came up with extended hand.

"Leaholme, I am very glad to see you here. This is the meeting, not of, but by, the waters. I thought I recognized you in the distance," he went on, as Leaholme merely touched the open, plausible hand, "and I hastened to you at once. I hope I may be pardoned for intruding on your gay party. I am here alone, pitifully alone, and this contrast strikes me forlornly.

"I am here alone, too," answered the earl, with a strange, cold emphasis, "and staying at the Queen's."

"Hush, Leaholme; refrain from falsehood, whatever you do. In the presence of ladies, too—themselves the very embodiment of truth."

It seemed to Tom well that the ladies *were* present, else he fancied the baronet's impertinence might have received a check he would not have relished.

Of this Sir Randal saw nothing; he was looking across the group to where Hester and Pollie stood, with a look half of anger, half of eager admiration. "There is only one way in which you can do penance for your falsehood, Leaholme," he said, airily. "Come, take pity on me."

"After the falsehood, you shall show me the penance," replied the earl, haughtily, "and I will perform it. Mrs. Goldsmith," he went on advancing to where she sat, "may I see you home to-night, as Mr. Delahoyde is gone?"

"But," began Mrs. Goldsmith, "what will Miss Lane and Miss Dyott, and——"

He interrupted her there very suddenly, though his words were cool. "They have a gentleman at their service. I am entirely at yours."

A pleased smile broke upon Hester's face, and Pollie saw it when she bid her good-night.

"You think this is all his thoughts for us," she whispered, "but it is for you as well; he is wise and kind to avoid you when that bad man hovers near him."

"It is done for your sake, I think, Pollie," she answered, tenderly, "though, indeed, I don't see why."

"Just to give us a protector when we have really none. And such a one as—that man himself dare not take liberties with. And—to keep away from you. Do not ask me to-night why I am so glad of this."

"Never, Pollie," was the earnest answer, "and I will respect his care for you—even his."

"As you will for yourself, dear, some day. Hessie," she whispered, eagerly, as Hester turned on her heel in sudden impatience, "do not look at Sir Randal. I cannot bear to see him watch you."

"Now, Miss Goldsmith," broke in Lord Leaholme's voice, "we are only waiting for you."

"I am coming to tea to-morrow, am I not, Mrs. Goldsmith?" asked Hester, as she held her hand before they parted; "but I forgot to ask at what time."

"We always drink tea at five," said Mrs. Goldsmith, smiling and pleased.

"Most unfashionable hours we keep," added Aunt Phyllis, briskly, "do we not, Miss Bruce?"

There was a slight movement in the group, and Sir Randal Platt stood bare-headed beside Hester.

"Have I the great pleasure of addressing Miss Hester Bruce?"

Hester started as she answered.

"This is the pleasure I have been seeking. My uncle, Colonel Platt, wished me to see you during my stay in England."

"Are you Nellie Platt's cousin?" she asked, with more geniality in the question, Leaholme noticed, than she had ever shown *him* through all their months of intercourse.

"I am, indeed, and I have a message for you from Nellie herself."

"I am glad of that," she answered, simply. "Give it to me now, please."

"Pardon me just at present, Miss Bruce. It is not a public message. If I may have the honor of walking home with you——"

"Though Lord Leaholme is kind enough to take you home, Miss Goldsmith, he cannot enjoy being kept waiting while you stare at Hessie," said Bella, below her breath, as her temper gradually got the better of her—or rather the worse.

"Come with us, Hessie," pleaded Pollie, never heeding Bella, and dropping unconsciously, in her earnestness, into the old pet name. "Oh, my dear, come with us—and Earl Leaholme."

Spite of the earnestness in Pollie's face, Hester shook her head with a careless smile.

"An odd guardianship yours would be, Miss Goldsmith," muttered Bella, in the same tone, "judging from your very unlady-like excitement. We are not accustomed to such public demonstrations."

With a burning flush upon her face, Pollie turned away; but now Hester followed her instantly.

"I am coming with you," she said, in a low, pained voice.

She gave Sir Randal a grave little bow, then walked on beside Pollie.

"Do not let Bella's words hurt you," she began, entreatingly.

"They hurt me more when I hear them addressed to you," answered Pollie. "I have my mother and Aunt Phyllis, but you—oh, my dear, you are lonely enough without that!"

"Oh, they are not bad when you have been with her a good while," replied Hester, the tears starting in the gathering darkness, "and they don't mean much when you come to look into them."

But Pollie not being able to come to look into them just then, and neither of the girls wishing to bring back the conversation to its broken beginning, they walked in silence down the lighted streets, thinking busily.

At last they stopped before a green door in a queer old street at the other end of the town.

"If you are going in, Miss Bruce," said Leaholme, reading something of the thoughts that were at work in the troubled little head, "I will call at Yrnteos House, and ask Tom to call for you at any time you like."

"Why?" she asked, almost fiercely, because it was the very thing she wished he would do, yet could not ask him.

"Then will you come back with me?"

"Why not, as we are both going the same way?"

So they walked away side by side, but as far apart as Hester could manage it; farther apart than Bella had ever managed it in all her life. Hester was silent with a most careless silence; looking about her at anything in the slightest degree interesting which she could find, stopping at the shop-windows now and then, and starting off again suddenly; her eyes never grew a shade less thoughtless, never lost their look of utter *insouciance*.

Leaholme was silent with a careless-seeming silence, too. No change upon his face told of the grieved and mortified feeling which grew to real pain as he felt that she would not

have been beside him at all, even in this thorough indifference, unless it had been to please some one else. Then, as he thought of the tenderness and love he had seen on her face when she spoke to Pollie, his heart grew wild with longing. Yet he was silent—with a careless-seeming silence, too.

They were turning from the lighted streets to the more dim and silent walk in front of the houses on the parade, when a sudden irrepressible smile shone in his eyes; a smile that had more tenderness in it than the voice showed, as he spoke down to his *nonchalant* little companion.

"You and I are a sociable pair, Miss Bruce, are we not?"

"Not very."

"But quite enough so, as far as your wishes are concerned. Why did you not finish the thought aloud?"

"There seems no need," said Hester, quickly; "my thoughts seem to be understood and spoken for me."

"Sometimes only. Sometimes they are understood and not spoken; sometimes they are not even understood."

"If you are so accustomed to read the thoughts of others, Lord Leaholme, tell me what prompted Miss Goldsmith to beg me to go with her to-night."

"I only cared to read——" he corrected himself suddenly.

"It was, I think, just one half of the thought which prompted *me* to go with her."

"I know what that was," said Hester, glancing up; "you saw that she knew, and would avoid, Sir Randal Platt, and you tried to prevent the possibility of his—teasing her."

"That was the half which was *not* hers, Miss Bruce."

"Tell me the other half."

He laughed low, and rather sarcastically.

"You never tell me a single thought or fancy of your own. You never speak to me except unwittingly, or to please others; yet, at your simple request, I am to show you the inmost thoughts of my heart. I have humbled myself already, Heaven knows! but—your laugh would jar upon me this fair, quiet night."

Hester did not answer, and in a few minutes they reached the door of Yrnteos House, where Tom lounged on the step, smoking, and Bella knelt at the open window above.

"Come up-stairs, Lord Leaholme," she called down; "we are waiting tea for you—and Hessie."

"Not to-night, thank you, Miss Lane," he answered, holding out his hand to Hester.

"Oh yes, you must. Mamma will take no denial, so I see I shall have to come down to fetch you. I want to ask you lots of things about your friend, Sir Randal Platt. Do you know he *would* walk home with us, and was so polite."

"Naturally, Miss Lane; but I have nothing to tell you about him."

The words were calm and commonplace; but Hester noticed, as he stood where the hall light fell upon him, that his lips were pressed together under the dark mustache.

"How came Sir Randal to walk with you, Lane?" he asked.

"I cannot say exactly how it came about," replied Tom, cheerfully; "he turned with us in the most natural manner possible, and began asking me if I was a relation to Lane of the Guards. There might have been a dozen Lanes in the Guards, for what I know; but Bella was all eagerness to know who Lane of the Guards was. I asked if he were one of the celebrated Devonshire Lanes, but he would not notice me or my remarks, so long as he and Bella were discovering relations. He flattered her, and she seemed to—— Oh, here she is. You enjoyed it, didn't you, Bella? And, I believe, before they were content, they had proved us first cousins to Park Lane."

"I will tell you all about it if you will come in, Lord Leatholme," pleaded Bella, seeing nothing of the angry darkening of his eyes. "Come, tea is waiting."

"Yet I cannot—though the temptation you hold out is great."

Looking up to find Hester's gaze curiously fixed upon his vexed face, he changed his tone easily, and stood there for a few minutes, jesting with them all before he said good-night.

Then he walked quickly into the hotel, shut the door of his own room, and sat down on a low easy-chair in front of the open window. Lying back, with the lamp-light from without playing on his troubled face, he thought out his own sad thoughts to the monotonous splash of the water on the beach. When, some time afterward, he rose and rang the bell, the thoughts were no pleasanter or clearer.

"It is too late to prevent it now"—so they ended—"he has made a footing for himself, and will not lose it. Oh, my cherished child, my little queen! I cannot prevent it without the right which you will never give me; but I will try, as well as I can, to guard Tom from the lessons he will teach him. If it is for your sake, my best beloved, God pardon me that I

do not act from higher motives. Perhaps presently," he added, laying his hand a moment on his forehead and pushing the hair from his anxious face, "the higher motive will grow from the hopelessness and, anguish of the other, and then there will be a rest of some kind; there must be."

"Brandt, take that card of mine and find out Sir Randal Platt. I should like to see him here to-night."

Sir Randal Platt had naturally a heavy, swaggering gait; but to-night, in contrast to the firm, light step that paced the room, it had a cringing in its heaviness and an effort in its swagger. He had naturally a bold smile upon his sinister and deep-lined face; but to-night, in contrast to the face that was so calm and fearless in its pride, it had a shadow of base fear upon it.

When the interview was over, Sir Randal hesitated a minute with the handle of the door in his hand.

"That is all you have to say, I presume?"

"That is all," answered the earl, without pausing in his slow walk to and fro.

"You do not even feel it necessary to confide to me the real motive of your interest in these people?" he asked, with the sinister curve of his long mustache.

"No, not at all."

"And you fancy, perhaps, that I do not see it?"

"I fancy even that," answered Leaholme, quietly. "Our interview need not be lengthened."

"Do you intend to show your teeth to me in their presence?"

"Decidedly, if I feel inclined to smile. Have you more to say, sir?"

"Yes, one thing. We are gentlemen, both of us. You will not forget that, my lord?"

"I hope you will never tempt me to do so," he said, with a quick flash in his eyes.

"And we meet in public as friends?"

"We meet as we have met a dozen times before. You surely can understand *that*, Sir Randal."

"Why do you not own what game you are playing, Leaholme?" began the baronet, with a sudden, insinuating smile.

"Come, own it now. I acknowledge beforehand that all is fair in love. See, I await your confession."

"If you wait," said the earl, stopping a moment before Sir Randal, "to hear me confess myself an accepted suitor for

the hand of Miss Lane, you may at once make up your mind to stay in that spot for twenty years to come."

Sir Randal laughed, a little encouraged.

"I never guessed that at all. I spoke of some one else."

"Excuse me, you spoke of no one at all."

"Well, I meant her cousin."

"I see. Then, if you wait to hear me confess myself an accepted suitor for the hand of Miss Bruce, you may make up your mind to a stay of twice twenty years."

"Indeed! Well, I will not deny that I am glad to hear it. I had fancied her a girl likely to win even the tardy admiration of my Lord Leaholme."

A weary look of pain stole into Leaholme's eyes; but his voice was very calm, very grave.

"As I told you when you first came in, I do not condescend to ask your projects. If you forget yourself as you have done before, I shall *act* instead of talk. What I told you besides, I trust you will remember. Good-night."

"If young Lane is not able to take care of himself, he is a fool," blurted out Sir Randal, before he opened the door.

His companion took no heed of this remark, once more resuming his measured walk up and down the room.

"And if Miss Bruce is not able to take care of herself," he went on, exasperated at the contemptuous silence, "she—as a girl—is all the more natural and irresistible; and my experience shall be at her service."

Leaholme's white face was turned away, and no quickening or hesitation in the quiet step told of the passion boiling within.

"I do not fear your lordship," Sir Randal continued, looking at him with a glance that was bold, if not quite fearless. "If it is to be war between us, why all is fair in that, you know, as well as in love; and I stand as good a chance as you do. *Bon soir!*"

CHAPTER XV.

ACROSS THE LINE OF LIGHT.

It must have been the very oldest street in that very old Welsh town, Hester thought, looking with inquiring glances along its rows of small, irregular white houses, and crooked, dusty elms planted along the edge of each foot-path.

"I feel almost sure I shall know the door at which we stopped and said good-bye last night; yet how can one be *quite* sure, with nothing to guide one but an uncertain memory?"

As she stood gazing around her doubtfully, Sir Randal Platt, who had lain in wait for this opportunity ever since he had imagined she could keep the engagement he had overheard, emerged leisurely from the doorway of a small hotel on that side of the street, and came up to her with a quiet, respectful bow. Seasoned man of the world as he was, clever, unscrupulous master in the art of flattery and address, there was something in Hester's face, under and beyond its radiant beauty—some rare power not often seen upon so bright and young a face—which held Sir Randal's glib tongue and eager feet in check; yet made him withal bent upon winning now as he had never been before.

Hè walked beside her, loitering more and more, and forcing her to do so too, making the most commonplace speeches with a look and manner which had been found irresistible with older heads than Hester's; a look and manner which would convey the fact that there was no one else living just then in Sir Randal's world.

"You said you had a message for me from Ella," said Hester at last, interrupting him quietly.

"Indeed I had," he answered, trying to recollect what he had decided on as the best invention. "She wants to know if you would go over to Paris to see her, on her return in the course of next spring?"

"Does she?" asked Hester, turning a rather surprised pair of eyes to him. "She tells me in her letters that she will not return for another year; and that Colonel and Mrs. Platt are staying that time abroad for the benefit of the children."

"But they will be in Paris in the spring, Miss Bruce," he said, unmoved; "and, indeed, if you promised to go, they would, I am sure—indeed, I know—they would——"

Hester cruelly left his false speech to be finished by a cough and a stammer. Then a cutting silence followed.

As they halted at the door which Hester had at last fixed upon, Lord Leaholme cantered down the street, just raising his hat as he passed where they stood in the act of saying good-bye. Hester looked after him, but with an indifference which charmed Sir Randall as he watched her.

"Poor Leaholme rides well," he said, in that particular tone which can make a word of praise do more harm than half a dozen words of blame, "much better than your cousin does. Yet Mr. Lane is a brave young fellow, where Leaholme is an abject coward. I do not know why I *should* mind it," he added, gayly, as Hester seemed inclined to dart in, "because I am perfectly competent to take care of myself; but I *think* I should not have chosen this time to be in Aberswys if I had known he was here; even though there are so much beauty and brightness in Aberswys now. But the fact is, there is something in the falseness of Leaholme's double character which—which angers me in spite of myself, and—pardon—one word, Miss Bruce; I do not think it is wise to encourage an intimacy between Leaholme and your cousin."

"Miss Lane?" asked Hester, provokingly.

"No; I speak of her brother. He is a sociable, genial young fellow, and—I speak to you in perfect confidence, Leaholme, as you are doubtless aware, is not one to have the guidance of such a character."

"I am not very generous myself, Sir Randal," said Hester, in her clearest tones, while she helplessly felt the truth of his words, "but I am not mean enough to answer—as you seem to expect—a mean insinuation against an absent acquaintance. Yet," she thought to herself, as she knocked at the green door, "I know it is true; and I know, too—ashamed as I ought to be to own it—that he *is* an acquaintance. I believe I ought to tell Uncle Alf what he is, for Tom's sake. But surely Tom has too much sense to be led by him; and—and I will not be taught by *that* sort of a teacher—even how to help Tom."

And Sir Randal, on whose retreating figure her eyes had turned for a moment as she said it, felt the hand she had touched burn as he swung his cane in it under the brown elms, and uttered that this would be more of a fight than he had bargained for; but was all the more, perhaps, worth the winning.

There was a very festive tea laid out in Mrs. Goldsmith's little sitting-room that evening, with various unusual luxuries in attendance. Such as a quart of strawberries (short metre) from the green grocer's opposite, in a state of high amalgamation; a box of sardines, opened for Pollie by the grocer's young man, and packed by him in a paper which exhibited a portrait of his master supported by a tea-chest, and a poem

ten verses descriptive of that gentleman's excellence as a scer, and entreating the public at the end of each verse to crown him King of Tea?" Carefully as this parcel was tried home by Pollie, there was evidence of her mind having been disturbed by study of the lyric, for the blue gingham dress (taken off now, and hanging in the small bedroom, like one of the Gamp effigies, had a deposit of oil down the front, and a disconnected and oleaginous embroidery. Then there was a cubic measure of plum-cake of Aberswys manufacture, constituted as to appear irresistibly tempting on the first day, and highly repellant on the second; as well as a double allowance of Aberswys cream, whose general debility did no credit to the sea-breezes. It did Mrs. Goldsmith's motherly heart good, and almost took away Aunt Phyllis's breath, to

Hester's intense appreciation of these luxuries. She tasted everything, and took three whole cups of tea, declaring truthfully that she did not know when she had enjoyed tea so thoroughly. And between whiles she talked wisely to Mrs. Goldsmith of the merits of the different shops; her sole knowledge of them consisting in the peeps she had given into them in her inquisitiveness.

Altogether it must have been the merriest party in Old Arundel; and when at last they started for the shore, Hester felt what a short visit she had had. Mrs. Goldsmith and her daughter preferred loitering on the sands, while the two girls took a long, slow, rambling walk over the cliffs, and talked of Pollie's life since they had been together before: talked of it very freely; for Pollie found it impossible to see things gloomily in the presence of this dear little friend.

"I like my daily teaching very much," she concluded, "and am very fond of my pupils. Does it ever strike you, Pollie, how seldom we use the word *love*? We are fond of them, or we care for them, or we like them; we very rarely *love* them."

"I suppose the more we love, the more sorrow we bring into our lives, Pollie."

"The more joy, too, though, dear. But it is odd how little a share we have to give. Just look over there, what a great crowd there is; all fellow-creatures; all having hearts that beat to the same joys and sorrows as our own; all hoping in some day the same home; yet we meet them, and pass them by, and stand beside them; and our hearts and pulses never vibrate with any feeling that is akin to love."

"Still—though that sounds disagreeable—I am very glad," said Hester, with a quaint simplicity which Pollie could not understand; "I am glad we can prevent loving people against our will: aren't you?"

"I scarcely know. I never thought of it," laughed Pollie, but she blushed a little as she spoke.

"Will you go to the Esplanade, Hessie?" asked Pollie, when they returned, an hour later, from their walk.

"No, thank you," laughed Hester, turning back on the crowd. "I would rather sit here with you, and watch the sunset."

And there they sat close together, in happy sympathy which needed few words.

The sun—near its setting now—rode above a bank of cloud; and, from their very feet on into the tremulous distance, there lay upon the quiet sea a golden pathway, rising and falling to the soft, low ripple of the waves upon the beach, but brightly shining to the end. Hester watched it in a curious delight. Looking along it dreamily, trying to imagine what the end would be—spell bound by the golden radiance which kept her eyes and thoughts enchained—she fancied it grew brighter and brighter, spreading almost to her hand. Wonderingly and longingly her eyes were resting upon it, when a quick, heavy shadow fell across it; a long, black, greedy shadow which buried it pitilessly.

Hester bent involuntarily and covered her eyes.

"Look up, Hessie, dear, and watch Lord Leaholme's yacht come in."

It was but the shadow of the yacht, then, crossing the line of light, and beyond it the brilliance lay and glimmered bright as ever; but Hester was for a moment cowardly and superstitious, and could not shake off this sudden pain.

CHAPTER XVI.

A VAGUE UNREST.

LITTLE Tottie Delahoyde—lingering on the beach behind the girls, unseen by them, while she glanced timidly and wishfully at them—saw Lord Leaholme land, and come up to her. Talking with her, he gradually brought her to Pollie's side, that she might show the pebbles she had been collecting. She

stood there slyly, her big, wide eyes fixed on Hester's face, as she wondered whether Hugh would call this teasing Miss Bruce. And Hester, with her hands clasped on her knee, instinctively avoiding putting herself before Pollie in the child's way, felt obliged to talk to Lord Leaholme when he sat down by them. But all through their conversation the child's inquisitive eyes followed her, and she saw that their untiring persistency amused him greatly.

"Where is your brother to-night, Tottie?" she asked, at last, a question which Pollie would have had to silently rehearse for an hour.

"He's busy writing," said the child, rather sadly, "something that came back this morning, and he's altering it to send again. When he's finished, he's coming for me. Am I teasing you?"

"Is it a sermon?" began Pollie.

But Hester interrupted her gently. "Your brother is very clever, Tottie; I wish I were as clever."

"You are," said the child, with a little look of awe in her eyes. "Hugh and Miss Goldsmith said you were."

Hester laughed merrily. "Well done, little Pollie. So much do I gain from the prejudice of a friend. Lord Leaholme, would you kindly propose a problem, that I may exhibit my powers?"

"Certainly; in what lies your claim to that praise from Miss Goldsmith?"

"In Pollie's own loving heart," replied Hester, warmly, and almost forgetting why he had asked.

"And from—Mr. Delahoyde?"

"In his total incapability of judging."

"I am convinced," he said, with very serious eyes. "All the powers you possess belong to Miss Goldsmith, and Mr. Delahoyde is an incapable—— There are one or two others here this season. Tottie, who are these?"

The child looked longingly at Alfie and Wattie, as they raced down to the shore, but did not venture to meet them. Behind them leisurely came Tom, "tired of the perpetual glances of admiration he received in the crowd," he said, with a sigh, as he slipped down among them.

"Not a bit, Tom," said Hester; "you enjoy them excessively."

"Leaholme," began Tom, rather anxiously, as he took up one of Hester's discarded gloves, "are you all right again?"

"Do I look very wrong?"

"No; but did you take cold, or anything?"

"Yes, I took *anything*, in the form of a hot, intoxicating beverage, prepared and driven down by poor Brandt. What is that air, Miss Goldsmith? I ought to know it well. Is it going to be the prayer from 'Dinorah,' 'Oh, live, or let me die?'"

"No; I think it is the prayer from 'Mose in Egitto,' my lord," answered Pollie, listening, while Hester was looking curiously across at Tom.

Smiling into her questioning eyes, and guessing what she wanted to say, Tom lightly provoked her by asking what the tune was.

"How can I possibly tell?" she retorted, knowing well the bit of Meyerbeer they were performing, but unwilling to say so, and prove Lord Leaholme right and Pollie wrong. "Tom, what has happened?"

"Did you not hear? What a far-away spot you must have been in!"

"I have been for a long, long walk with Miss Goldsmith," she answered hastily. "What has happened?"

"A fellow happened to get himself nearly drowned, and was saved by another fellow."

"They were not fellows," said Wattie, sternly.

"Well, it strikes me there were some sort of a fellowship between them," answered Tom, laughing heartily at his little brother and his own pun; "but, at any rate, one good swimmer saved another good swimmer, who was cramped in the water."

"Who was he, Mr. Lane?" asked Pollie, as Hester's eyes wandered out to the quiet, deceitful sea.

"I think he is the general music-master of the town, Miss Goldsmith. I did not speak to him, though, in consequence of his being unconscious of my presence during the interview."

"Do not joke of it, Tom," whispered Hester, without turning.

"Do you want to know who saved him?"

"I know," she answered, very quietly.

Tom, lying on his elbow, the picture of happy, unruffled self-complacency, did not trouble himself to wonder how.

"Platt is doing double duty in the promenading up there, Leaholme," he said, "and is brilliant to-night. He has been

making up to the girls for their absence, and helping me to bear Hessie's. Old Berkeley is charmed with him; ditto his daughter. By the way, is he sweet upon the fair Marian?"

"If he were, the sweetness would hardly extend to me," laughed Leaholme, "so I cannot judge."

"He seems to be well up in the ways of the world."

"Like the cat and hen in Anderson's tale," said Hester, promptly, "who used to say, 'We and the world.'"

"Have you had your message, dear?"

"Yes, he gave it to me to-day."

Tom looked at her with a harmless frown.

"So *you* have been enjoying his society to-day, too?"

"I met him as I went to Mrs. Goldsmith's. Everybody meets everybody everywhere every day, at the sea-side."

Her easy, careless tone smoothed Tom's face again, and he spoke gayly to Tottie, who had come up to him with her small hand held out shyly in its loose cotton glove.

"Pray what is that for, Miss Delahoyde?"

"I have to go. Miss Goldsmith says it is nine o'clock, so I ought to go."

"I could not shake such a tiny hand if you were to give me—all your money," said Tom, gravely looking at her. "Kiss all of us instead, you mite of a lady."

She stooped and kissed him with a pretty, earnest simplicity, and he turned laughingly to Hester.

"How differently you received my request when you were a smaller child, and I was an innocenter boy!"

A shadow fell over Hester's face as she held Tottie in her arm.

"What is that verse, Miss Bruce, which so evidently is running in Tom's head?" asked Leaholme, watching her:

" ' See the mountains kiss high heaven,
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister flower would be forgiven
If it disowned its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth,
And the moonbeams kiss the sea;
What are all these kisses worth,
If thou kiss not me! ' "

"How very silly!" said Hester, impatiently. "The mountains never kiss high heaven, there are miles of distance between them; and I think the waves are always running away from each other. As for the flowers, they may be forever

quarreling and hating each other for all we know. The sun-light did clasp the earth a few minutes ago; but—where is it now?"

"You and the poet appear to differ," laughed Tom, little guessing that the pain that darkened her eyes and quickened her words was caused by his recalling that last happy day that her childhood had known; and that the anger which flashed so suddenly was for the one who brought down the cloud upon that happy time.

"Here's Hugh!" cried Tottie, as a step advanced behind them.

"Just in time, Mr. Delahoyde," said Leaholme. "Please to give your sister permission to stay a little longer."

"Hugh, I haven't teased," whispered Tottie, softly.

"May she stay until that beautiful pink light has faded?" asked Hester, in her own natural tone again.

He smiled content, and joined the party very gladly.

"Do you sit up to supper, Tottie?" asked Alfy with a little anxious jealousy.

"Yes, always; and I make my own bread-and-milk—and sometimes Hugh's."

Poor Hugh! The tears rushed into Pollie's eyes as she glanced at him; but Leaholme spoke on most composedly:

"Do you know, Tottie, that when I was as small as you, I never sat up to supper except once. And how do you think we managed to get that treat? I and my fellow pupil sent our tutor an offering of a sugar paper bag filled with hedge-nuts ready cracked (the cracking beforehand was a brilliant idea of the other pupil's), and a text of Scripture cautiously written out in French (as being more adapted to a scholarly mind), and in a neat text-hand, which I used to think was called so because peculiarly adapted to that purpose. In all the two years that I was pupil at Leaholme Rectory we could only accomplish such a feat once. Then, I am happy to say, it was quite successful."

"Did you really have to beg to stay up to supper?" asked the child, looking wonderingly at him from top to toe.

"Indeed, I only sat up that once in two years. That is the very reason I grew into such a length, as you are remarking. They say people grow more in bed than anywhere."

"I can't fancy you a little boy," said Tottie, her head on one side, thoughtfully.

"But I was, indeed, once upon a time—a much nicer little boy than Alfie or Wattie; and I wore a deep white collar on my shoulders, and a broad frill round it."

"Tottie evidently cannot compass that," said Hester, smiling, "nor believe that there could ever be a time when you 'were very small.'"

"And gold, and Greek, and love unknown to me," he said, finishing the quotation with a merry laugh.

"I remember sitting up to supper once, Tottie," said Pollie, looking seriously into the little pale face at Hester's side, "but it was *only* sitting up to it, for I slept soundly during the whole of the meal, sitting very upright in my chair as if I had felt the honor, and upborne it in my sleep. I never asked to stay up again, for the remembrance was humiliating in the extreme, and covered me with confusion."

An hour afterward, as they sat idly and pleasantly chatting in the twilight, Sir Randal Platt discovered them with the aid of his eye-glass, and walked rapidly down from the parade. Stopping among them, he bent down to Hester. "Miss Bruce," he said, "your cousin is anxiously expecting you to join her."

Hester's truthful eyes saw the falsehood, and showed that they saw it. "You have made a mistake, Sir Randal. I am visiting Mrs. Goldsmith."

"They really wait for you. May I not——"

"Shall you and I join mamma now?" said Pollie, with a violent effort, as they rose.

"If you please, Pollie. Perhaps, Sir Randal, you will be kind enough to tell my cousin I shall be at home in an hour. And, Tom, please to come and fetch me."

"Oh! here comes Miss Lane toward us," said Sir Randal, biting his lip and drawing back a little as the girls followed him to the beach, gorgeous and dazzling in their parade costume.

"What council are you holding in this out-of-the-way spot, Lord Leaholme?" asked Bella, with a smile which did not hide the sharp, suspicious glance she threw around her.

"A discussion on several matters of importance; but we have not solved the one great problem yet, Miss Lane."

"What is that?"

"The vexed question respecting the exact number of strawberries which grow in the sea."

"You would not have listened long to that nonsense."

"I should have listened eagerly to the end of the debate, and then rejoiced to think we were exactly as wise as we were at the beginning."

"Lord Leaholme, we are come to take you back to tea with us," said Miss Berkeley, ignoring every one else except Tom. "Bella has promised for Mr. Lane."

"Thank you, not to-night, Miss Berkeley. I must go back, and prepare some dispatches."

"Surely they can wait for to-morrow—I mean Monday. Do come with us."

"Impossible!" he laughed, with a shake of his head.

"Surely you cannot say *no* to me, when I have been so long hunting you out."

"Impossible, too, so please do not tempt me."

They stopped a little, trying to persuade him, then they turned; and Sir Randal and Tom left Hester's side unwillingly, and went with them, too.

"Pollie," said Hester, turning, in her wistful, childlike way, to this one friend, "I shall like to come home with you just for an hour."

Pollie was delighted, and Hester's face brightened as she bid good-night to Hugh and Tottie. Then the little boys came up for their kisses.

"I will walk home with you, small friends," said the earl, as he waited.

"Thank you, Lord Leaholme. Let us go along the cliffs a bit; it is so nice and late."

It seemed a temptation to others besides the children, for they loitered there, gazing out upon the fading sea.

"Who would imagine it had nearly swallowed up one bright human life to-day?" said Hester.

"How dreadful for him!" shuddered Pollie.

"Why, Miss Goldsmith?" asked Leaholme, with eyes that almost dazzled her. "He would have known many things by this time; all the secrets that puzzle us; and have entered that land where 'Every hand may clasp a brother, and the loneliest find a friend.' What a promise to—to—any who are lonely!"

"But there would have been the agony first," said Pollie.

"True, poor fellow! so there would. The dead green walls around him; the horror of utter hopelessness. I overlooked that: and he would be more to be pitied for that, I suppose, than if the pain had been drawn through a life-time."

"I can only think," said Hester, softly, wondering at Leaholme's old tone, "that I am very glad he was saved. Though we are so restless and discontented here, of course we love our life most dearly. Sometimes it does not satisfy us, but it is generally because we want more, not less, in it."

"There is a verse I like to recall in the many times when I am not satisfied," said Leaholme, in a low, earnest tone. "Do you remember it?"

"Far out of sight, while sorrows still enfold us,
Lies the fair country where our hearts abide;
And of it bliss is naught more wondrous told us
Than these few words—I shall be satisfied."

As he stood a moment, bare-headed, bidding them good-night, there ran a wild wish through Hester's heart, which was too quick for her to comprehend; which she never *did* comprehend until the summer light had faded and a dreary winter clung about her heart.

CHAPTER XVII.

HESTER'S HATRED.

"HESSIE," whispered Tom, as he took his seat beside her in the pew at church, "shall you appreciate the service to-day? We are to have no music."

"Nonsense, Tom," she whispered back, glancing up at the gallery opposite; "is not the organist there?"

"He is not able to play; it was he who was nearly drowned yesterday. They are speaking of it outside."

"How sorry I am!"

All this had been said in the silence which preceded the arrival of the clergyman, an arrival which seemed as if it were going to be a tardy one to-day. Mrs. Bruce raised her eyebrows across at Bella, who rose slightly to glance over the church. Mr. Bruce began to fidget a little impatiently. The school-children followed the example of Tom and Hester, and whispered to each other. There was just a perceptible sign of impatience all through the crowded church; an indefinite sound that was scarcely more than a breath, but which was hushed suddenly as the soft slow tones of the organ crept down among the listeners. There were some who had heard of the organist's accident, and had come prepared to dis-

pense with the usual music; there were some who had waited for it in certain expectation, never guessing at the absence of the musician; but to both alike the beautiful air came this morning with an exceptional pathos:

“He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.”

Hester looked up, trying to pierce the curtain with her eyes. Bella bent over and whispered to Tom:

“Is it Lord Leaholme?”

“Yes,” said Tom, back to her, “of course it is; who else? He was with me when they were talking of it.”

“Hush!” whispered Hester, involuntarily.

Listening eagerly, critically, as she did at first, a strange, awed feeling gradually stole over her which she could not comprehend. For all her life she remembered that service, and how she had felt a rebuke to herself in it all, as if an unseen presence were speaking to her alone, and speaking in reproach. And when it was over, Hester drew a long breath of relief.

Then the grand triumphant notes stirred her very heart, as Beethoven’s “Hallelujah” filled the church to every corner, almost swaying it, Hester thought. The congregation lingered in their seats, in the aisles, in the deep porch, unwilling to leave the church (summer morning as it was, and dinners and the sea awaiting them) so long as such wondrous harmonies echoed through them.

“Wake up, and come back to me from Cloud-land, Hessie dear,” said Tom watching her rapt face.

“Yes, I am here, Tom.”

“Does not he play well?”

“How can it be? I never knew he played the organ.”

“Did not you? That is his great instrument. Have you never been to Wye Abbey, then?”

“Never.”

“You would have seen his organ if you had; it beats this hollow. I believe music always was his chief passion, and always will be.”

Hester closed her hand on Pollie’s as she passed.

“Pollie, was not Beethoven a true musician?”

“Yes, dear,” said Pollie, gently smiling into the bright, enthusiastic face, “I think so—when some one who understands him, as I cannot do, interprets him to us as Lord Leaholme has done to-day.”

Hester dropped the hand, suddenly calm again.

"Mr. Delahoyde," she said, seeing that he was passing her with only a quiet bow, as she stood in the porch, "are you going to preach this afternoon at Llanforda?"

"Only to read the prayers, Miss Bruce."

"We are coming," she said, stroking Tottie's little white face, with a strange, dreamy tenderness.

"How beautiful Earl Leaholme has made the music to-day," Hugh said.

She only nodded, and he passed on with his little sister clinging to his hand.

"You seem to have a word or two for every one, Hessie," said Tom, as she came back to him after talking a little with Mrs. Goldsmith; "and they seem always just the words that please most."

"What are they waiting for, do you think, Tom?"

"For the amateur organist, of course, dear. Let us walk on."

"No, thank you. I feel inclined for a large party."

Tom's face clouded, as it always did when she so carelessly defeated his plans of appropriation, plans which he always made with so much gay and loving selfishness. He waited beside her until they all appeared, and kept near her even when she took her place at Bella's side.

"Are you going to Llanforda this afternoon, Lord Leaholme?" asked Bella, lingering for him.

"Yes, I hope so."

"So are we; but we must not hope for a treat such as we have had this morning."

"And yet you go?"

Bella did not detect the sarcasm.

"I shall never listen to the organ there after hearing your playing."

"Nor shall I," said Hester, heartily, "for there is no organ there."

"And the harmonium is rheumatic in every joint," said Leaholme, laughing at himself for having for one moment fancied her first words were earnest in their approbation.

"Does it not make you fear the damp there too, Miss Lane?"

"Churches are always damp, more or less," she said.

"But Llanforda is more damp."

After an early dinner they all set out for the romantic little inland church of Llanforda, one of the oldest in Wales;

Marian Berkeley joining them at her own door, and Lord Leaholme overtaking them a few minutes afterward.

"What a gay cavalcade we are!" smiled Bella, buttoning her delicate flesh-colored gloves.

"I feel like a troop of old Covenanters going to service; don't you, Bella?" asked Tom, quizzing her very un-Covenanter-like costume.

"Listen!" said Leaholme, as they stood a moment looking upon the distant church, while the sweet, softened peal of the far-off bells floated up to them. "It makes one feel, with Friar Cuthbert, that, after all, the bells themselves are the best of preachers."

"Indeed they are," said Marian, decisively.

"I think, if they are," spoke Hester, "it is because the others are so good. Their memory and influence come back to us upon the bells. Don't you think so, Miss Berkeley?"

"No," replied Marian, coldly. "Though I suppose your experience is unlimited, and I ought not to contradict you."

"Why, Miss Berkeley?" asked Lord Leaholme, watching the brilliant color spread over Hester's face.

"Because there is such an evident infatuation in the way Miss Bruce lays herself out to that dreary young clergyman who sat with you last night. And because I saw her this morning coming home from the early service with——"

She paused mysteriously, and bit her lips.

"With whom, please?" asked Hester, in a proud, clear voice.

"I would rather not tell," Marian replied, in the distant tone which she always used to Hester.

"Was it a gentleman or lady?" inquired Bella, in her blithest tones.

"Neither."

"Then it was not Hessie," said Tom, promptly.

Marian laughed shortly. "She was with a young person who looked more like a lady's maid than a lady."

"Talking to Ruth, I suppose, dear?" Tom whispered to her.

"No," answered Hester, with a little shake of her head.

"Then who was it?"

"This morning I was with the dearest friend I have," she said, the hot tears starting. "You mean Miss Goldsmith, of course, Miss Berkeley, and she is as true a lady as any in Aberswys; and would be, even if she were a lady's maid."

"She is a lady's maid, you say?" drawled Marian, with a satirical elevation of her eyebrows. But Hester, remembering where she was going, and the sacredness of the day, pressed her lips together and kept back the angry rejoinder.

"Miss Berkeley cannot mean Miss Goldsmith," said Lord Leaholme, speaking to Bella in most unmistakable seriousness, "because one lady instinctively recognizes another; and she would have recognized a lady in Miss Goldsmith. I am proud to say I know her, too."

Now this was baffling. If the earl considered her unmistakably a lady, Marian's speech had been at least unnecessary, if not a stupid blunder. If he, with the highest society of all Europe open to him, had acknowledged himself proud of this girl's friendship, then, at any rate, Marian need not have mentioned her in such contemptuous style.

But Marian Berkeley never showed herself discomfited, and the only visible effect of this unexpected rejoinder was an increased coldness in her manner to Hester.

"It is a picturesque old church, is it not?" asked Leaholme, breaking the awkward silence.

"Have you made a choice for Ruyglen yet, Lord Leaholme?" asked Lydia.

"No. I shall hear first the report of the substitutes. You have no idea how well young Ferriman seemed to be going to manage. I can tell you how he has done so after I return. I go home to-morrow for a few days."

"You have no friend you wish to pop into such a snug thing?" inquired Tom. "I thought these good livings were always bespoken beforehand."

"I have not known it so; but this is only the second that has become vacant since I—came to Leaholme. The first was at Leaholme. What a curious old gate! Think of this being almost the very oldest church in Wales."

Hester did not think it was at all hard to believe when she stood inside; the vaulted roof so high above her, propped and supported in many places, and patched here and there with light boards, which, like the new white seats, contrasted oddly with the dark, rich, gloomy wood of the old building.

As Hugh read the service Hester felt a strange, restless feeling that was wonderfully different from the morning one. When it was over, and they left the church, Hester's wandering eyes caught sight of the object of their search, and her voice was almost pleading when she said to Bella:

"Would there be any objection to my asking Miss Goldsmith to walk home with me? She is here alone."

"Don't be silly!" whispered Bella, hastily; "of course she has nothing to do with us."

"Then, Bella," she said, with the strange humility which so often battled with her quick impetuosity, "you must forgive me if I go to her."

"You generally do as you like," answered Bella, carelessly; "of course you will do so now."

"Bella means you had better stay with us," put in Lydia, kindly.

"Not I," returned Bella; "I mean that I know she will do exactly what she chooses, because she always does."

"Will you excuse me, Miss Berkeley," asked Hester, turning to her, "if I join my friend?"

"What?" she asked, eyeing Hester frigidly. "I beg your pardon, Lord Leaholme."

Hester turned away, only just in time to hide the grieved, proud flush. Tom looked after her with a moment's hesitation, then walked on with his own party, leaving the two girls to talk alone. Bella glanced up quickly to see, with a keen, paltry satisfaction that the earl did not look after her at all.

Yet, somehow, even to Bella, the walk was not so pleasant as she had anticipated. Tom was gay and agreeable as usual; but his easy, gracious vanity was always rather commonplace when Hester was not by to laugh at or turn it off. Neither his sister nor his friends could call out his best points as she could, nor make a pleasant joke of his weak ones. There was an effort, too, in Leaholme's manner which, though none of them could tell exactly what was wanting, prevented it having its usual brightening effect.

Pollie and Hester walked together along the broad, white, sunny road; now and then dipping together into the shadow of a great oak or elm as they skirted the Llanforda woods, and standing there a minute to revel in it. Very slowly, very happily they went, enjoying eagerly every sight and sound and scent of the rich summer afternoon. It was some little time after the others had reached home that they entered the town, and, doing so, came suddenly upon Sir Randal Platt, who, having met Hester's party without her, had hurried on hopefully to meet her.

But meeting her with a companion was a blow he had not

anticipated; meeting her with Miss Goldsmith was evidently a blow that struck him rather awkwardly.

Never glancing into Pollie's crimsoning face, he raised his hat to Hester with an action which fully deserved the satisfaction it gave him. To charm one girl, and humiliate the other, was his mission, and Sir Randal fully believed he had accomplished it.

"How you must dislike him, Pollie!" said Hester, noticing the change even this casual meeting had made in her.

"Indeed, I do; I cannot hide it if I try."

"Do not try to hide it from me: do not try to hide anything from me, Pollie. When are you going to tell me why you hate him?"

"Oh, Hessie, he has done so much wrong!"

"Has he?" asked Hester, a little absently; "perhaps he was tempted."

Pollie laughed ironically.

"I always think now, Pollie," she went on simply, "that those who sin as—that those who sin may have been tempted. And I always try to remember that they may have struggled long and hard before they—fell. Only," added the girl, with a sudden drawing of her breath, "it is different when I *know* them to have been the tempters, sinning themselves in the worst and basest way of all. Oh, Pollie, some people could be such clever tempters? I can tell that they could."

"Yes; and I cannot help my hard thoughts of Sir Randal Platt, though I tried very, very hard this afternoon, as I listened when Mr. Delahoyde read those words, you remember? 'Be ye kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you.'"

"I remember," said Hester, with a quick, impatient light in her eyes, which seemed to burn into some living memory of her own.

"Mr. Delahoyde laughed one day when I was obliged to meet Sir Randal, and said I was 'a very Ovid in the art of hating.' I did not understand him a bit."

"I do," said Hester, with a quick look into her own mind, "but the question is, what is hatred?"

"I do not feel hatred for him," returned Pollie, anxiously, "only dislike and aversion."

"I do not think we know whether we have the right words or not," said Hester, slowly. "I must look into Webster,

Perhaps I do not hate—anybody; only feel dislike and aversion. I will look what hatred means to-morrow.”

She had spoken with a little laugh, sad as well as satirical; but when she had left Pollie in Old street, she went on her way with a look upon her face far removed from laughter; a look as if some sad, uneasy puzzle refused to be solved in the beautiful, busy little head.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“MURDERER.”

A CERTAIN wise and witty Frenchman has written that affectation is a greater enemy to the face than smallpox. Therefore was Bella a much plainer girl than she would have been deep-marked with that objectionable disease, as she stood one morning on the steps of Yrnteos House, a few days after Lord Leaholme's return from Herefordshire. Her costume of bright mauve muslin, as yet uncrushed and unspotted, seemed to have been out somewhere during a shower of satin rosettes. Folded across her shoulders was a tiny garment to match, the mechanism of which is familiar to us, but not the name. Doubtful on that point, we referred it at once to a high authority, and learned that it was a pelerine; and, uncertain as to the exact meaning of the term, we consulted a dictionary, and found that the celebrated compiler (instructed, we trust, by a milliner of some experience) defined it in a most assured manner as “A lady's long cape, hanging low in front.”

There was a mistake somewhere. The article we would describe was no pelerine, for it was not only not long, but it was as short as possible. And not only did it not hang low in front, but all the hanging was emphatically behind. We referred again to a higher authority. “That was a fichu.” Harder still for our weak minds to grasp. Dictionary again—Boyer this time. “Fichu, a handkerchief.” Did handkerchiefs possess masses of bows and frills and streamers in that profusion? Our insatiable mind must be satisfied. We referred once more—to a higher authority this time. That was—did we not know?—a Marie Antoinette. We breathed a free enlightenment at last. We could not dispute that name; for was there any garment in a milliner's power to

make, or ours to imagine, in which the pretty young queen might not have disported during those masked walks of hers upon the terraces of Versailles? It was a Marie Antoinette, then, which Bella Lane was adjusting coquettishly as she glanced down the steps at Hester with a shade of contemptuous pity; for Hester had no magnificent mauve feather hanging upon her loose brown hair, and was not standing opposite the Earl of Leaholme, and feeling herself a pretty little figure to be gazed upon.

"I have been looking forward to this picnic all the time we have been here. Are not you glad we are going, Lord Leaholme?"

"I have extreme difficulty in subduing my exuberance. I hope I may continue to do so until we reach Gloddva, or Macgregor will think he is attached to a balloon. Miss Bruce, are you also overcome by jubilant anticipation?"

He looked down into her face, trying, as usual, to win a word or look to himself. But she took no heed of the remark, her eyes following the passers-by.

"Here are the carriages," cried Bella, "and Sir Randal is in ours, and not with the Berkeleys; and Tom is going to drive us. I wish you would not ride, Lord Leaholme; I wish you would come with us. Mamma is going with the Berkeleys, and there is plenty of room."

"I require too much, Miss Lane. I find my superfluous length very often in the way, and—think of crushing this!"

He touched Bella's crisp dress with the parasol she had given him to open; then gave it to her as she took her seat, and his groom brought up Macgregor.

"Sit on the box beside me, Hessie," said Tom, stooping from his seat. "The servants are going behind."

"Take your seat, Hessie—inside," smiled Mrs. Bruce, as she passed to the other carriage.

They rolled along the hot, white road, through a wide and beautiful valley, literally infolded by mountains; and the horseman divided his time between the two carriages, loitering behind sometimes rather needlessly, Bella thought; especially when they left the road, at last, and turned into the avenue of Gloddva Park. But they were busy looking about them now to catch a sight of the old towers.

Neglected and grass-grown, this was still a grand old avenue, and the slanting sun-rays crept through the leaves and



touched their faces caressingly as they drove under the luxuriant limes.

In an open yet shaded spot among the woods that crowned the upland they dined, lingering there afterward in idle pleasure.

Then they set off to stroll about the silent grounds, and still—as all through this day—Sir Randal hovered close at Hester's side. Quietly, almost imperceptibly, he managed it, but none the less surely. The time was drawing near, he felt, for this intercourse to cease, and, with all its chills and defeats, he found it inexpressibly attractive to him.

It was otherwise with Leaholme. He had seemed to be almost unconscious of her presence all this day; never seeking her—never even happening to be near her until now that, late on in the afternoon, they were investigating the shut-up, ruinous old mansion. Then Hester, for the first time, found him beside her. Tom was examining the rotten-looking old shutters, in search of a way of ingress, and the others were all waiting for him, standing about on the long, lank grass that grew up to the low windows, and looked as if it, too, was trying to force its way in.

Hester looked round upon a wondrous view, while the glorious trees above her, guarding the ruined building, shook their bright summer leaves softly, grieving, through all their grand and vigorous life, for the desolation and decay which they looked down upon, and which even this full, rich glory of the summer sunshine could neither beautify nor animate.

And this is an Englishman's castle, is it?" said Leaholme, looking up at the cracked and moldy walls and broken stonework.

"Yes, and an English earl's, too," replied Bella; "compare this with Leaholme castle!"

"I cannot yet, not being able to foresee the conduct of the last earl, nor his fate."

"It is not at all likely to be a fate like this earl's," said Marian; "he did most wicked things."

"So I have heard."

"He merely closed the door politely on his only son," laughed Tom, "and muttered a curse or two which happened to be heard in higher quarters, and flung back upon himself. The hopeful heir, I believe, felt himself driven to all kinds of disgrace and crime, and at last to death."

"No wonder the father's house is left so utterly desolate."

"No wonder, Miss Bruce," said Leaholme, looking intently at her as she spoke: "the father deserved it for driving him to that, whatever the lad may have done to anger him. At least, so they say here; do you think so?"

"I am afraid to judge; I dare not," she answered in a slow, dreary tone.

"And I *would* not, for we do not know what the boy had been."

She glanced up at him oddly for a moment, then turned away with a look upon her face, half of fear, half of scorn; and he did not attempt to follow her.

"I cannot manage it," called Tom; "you will have to give up your freak, girls."

"Oh, no; we cannot," cried Bella. "Sir Randal, I am sure you will try to get us in somehow."

"Are you anxious to penetrate these gloomy chambers? Are we to let the sunlight in?" Sir Randal asked, bending to say it meaningly in Hester's ear.

"Bella would like it—so should I," she added, guessing he would go the sooner for that.

But the earl was before him, and with strong hands and stronger will pulled aside one of the bolted shutters and unlocked the window through a broken pane. Pushing it on its hinges, he let a streak of daylight into the dusky room, through which the crash had echoed with a ghostly sound.

"I dare not go even now: I am sure I dare not," exclaimed Bella, drawing back with charming timidity, as Tom offered his hand on the threshold, and Leaholme waited inside.

"Let me go first," asked Hester, taking her dress around her, and crushing in through the small opening, eager to see what the place was like. Half the floor was in darkness, heavy darkness, from floor to ceiling; the other half was lighted by a broad, straight line of sunshine, and there Hester's eyes seemed riveted.

On the decaying, mildewed wall, above Lord Leaholme, as he stood waiting for her, she saw eight bold, fierce letters, written in blood, and spelling MURDERER.

Hester's wide, burning eyes held the picture as if to retain it for all years to come. The one ghastly word written over *him*, and for her eyes to read, seemed sent her as a rebuke, and her heart acknowledged it in a moment.

Months afterward she could recollect how the gayety had faded from his face while she stood looking at him; and how,

when he had started forward to assist her, she had shudderingly raised her two hands to push him off before he should touch her, still with that horror of him written on her face. She could recall how slowly and unsteadily he drew back when she helplessly gave her hands to Sir Randal, and whispered to him to take her from the terrible room. She could recall the laugh with which they had all greeted her frightened face, and how she had tried to join in it and failed; but she never could recall how she had spent the rest of that long, blank day. Driving home at last, in the saddening twilight, Sir Randal told her he had been asking an old man who hung about the place how came that word in blood upon the wall of the deserted house. And the old man had been telling him how once, many years before, the shutters of this room being open, a fox had rushed through the window to take refuge there; how the hounds had followed him, and found him lying cut and bleeding just within; and how the huntsman, standing resting there and talking over the legend of the place, had taken the brush in sport and written that word upon the wall in the animal's warm life-blood.

Hester looked along the shadowy road, trying to take in this story; but when Macgregor walked beside the carriage she turned away her tired little face, because that picture still seemed flashing in her brain.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN PERIL OF DEATH.

SITTING under the gigantic cliffs round Boulder Point, the young people from Yrnteos House, with Marian Berkeley, Lord Leaholme, and Sir Randal Platt, lunched very comfortably and merrily on sandwiches and champagne, which they had brought with them. They had made their way over the huge stones into the second bay, and were congratulating each other on the fact; for they had never been so far before, not even on that day, at the very beginning of their visit, when Pollie Goldsmith had so unexpectedly joined them.

"I'm so glad we're here!" cried Alf; "I think this a capital place to find things, and we needn't hurry home, and nobody knows where we are. May I just run round the Point for some barley sugar? I won't be a minute. The woman was there when we passed."

"But she is not a fixture, and so may be miles away now," said Tom. "Stay where you are, Alfy."

"I could just as well go, couldn't I, Bella?"

"Certainly not: you are in charge to-day, so you must keep with us."

"How *could* such a thing harm me, Hessie?" persisted the child.

"We should not know until you were harmed, and then it would be rather late," returned Hester, lightly, but gently.

"Oh, Lord Leaholme, ask for me to go."

"My dear fellow," he said, looking wofully into the boy's face from his low seat among the stones, "did you happen to see as you passed that the barley-sugar lady was performing on her sticks?"

"How?" asked Alf, with a merry laugh.

"I am sorry you missed it. She was polishing the sticks with her apron, breathing upon them first to promote a shine. She told me 'the young ones were more enticed when it looked most clear-like.' Now run off, or other young ones will have been enticed to eat it all."

"I don't want to go now," said Alf. "I couldn't eat it now."

"You are wanting in taste, Alf, and polish is thrown away upon you. Tell Wattie not to go head-foremost after a sea-anemone. His head disturbs the groundwork of the pool."

Shaded comfortably from the flashing afternoon sunshine, and refreshed by the cool lapping of the glistening waves that broke lazily and gently on the stones, they sat talking fitfully as the time went past; not flying past, nor creeping, but floating in all idleness and serenity.

"How those people are hurrying home round the Point," said Bella, when a long, long, pleasant time had passed.

"What grotesque heads!" said Tom, lazily, while Miss Berkeley raised her little gold eye-glass.

"You are very fond of pulling our fashions to pieces, Mr. Lane," said Marian, forgetting to wonder why the parties were hastening homeward.

"Heaven forefend! What ruins I should have about my devoted head!" exclaimed Tom, in mock horror.

"But you follow your own as keenly as any one," remarked his sister, playfully.

"Rigidly. I feel it my duty to do so."

"And are you ever bored by an unfeeling tailor sending in his bill?" inquired Sir Randal, gaily.

"Now and then; but he is a most gentlemanly fellow, and never allows me to keep him waiting."

"Why should you want to keep him waiting?" asked Hester. And for an instant Tom looked at her oddly, wondering whether she would be hard upon any one who should let debts creep around him; wondering whether, in difficulties of his own, he should be most afraid of hurting her by telling her, or most anxious for her help and sympathy. Poor Tom! When the time came, no thought of her pain or disappointment prevented his following his own weak, selfish wish.

"Though I see exceptions around me," said Sir Randal, suavely, "Lane has some grounds for his laughter. Ladies do wear their chignons at an extraordinary altitude, do they not?"

"Yes," replied Bella, naively, "it is very ridiculous; don't you think so, Lord Leaholme?"

"Not at all," he answered, composedly, "if it does not pull your hair in an unnatural manner and cause you internal anguish. The chignons in a higher degree of latitude are, I suppose, cooler and more refreshing for this weather."

"Miss Bruce is too wise to destroy the artistic beauty of *her* head by a—by these modern contrivances," whispered Sir Randal, with a smiling glance of admiration.

"I very often were a chignon," answered Hester, coolly, "and when I do, I always fasten it very high, and surround it by 'modern contrivances.' It does 'pull my hair in an unnatural manner,' and 'cause me internal anguish;' but it looks very fashionable, and adds a few inches to my height, so I don't mind the pain at all."

Leaholme's eyes were laughing behind their lashes, and Sir Randal was gazing inquisitively into her piquant little face.

"How odd that there are no boats out to-day!" said Marian, stonily. "They improve the scene greatly."

"Why, Wattie, what is the matter?" cried Hester.

"The tide is coming in so fast. Do you forget?"

"Oh, there is plenty of time," answered Tom.

Bella drew out her tiny jeweled watch.

"I think it is five, but my watch gains. I cannot depend upon it."

"It is after four," exclaimed Sir Randal, starting up,

"and the tide is coming in. Great Heavens! it will be round the Point."

Leaholme sprang to his feet and looked round. They could not see the way they should have to return, so the gentlemen hurried down over the great awkward stones to reconnoitre. The tide was up, covering the way they had come. It would have reached to the waist of even Leaholme himself. The waves were strong and advancing steadily; the rocks below were treacherous. Tom looked around blankly.

"It will come rapidly now over the remaining part," said Sir Randal, in a loud tone, as he walked and gazed about. "Great Heavens! Leaholme, what are we to do? No boats are out."

Now nothing could have betrayed Sir Randal's fear more than this appeal to the earl; an appeal which, in a calm moment, he would have been very slow indeed to make.

"The girls will be frightened as it comes toward them," began poor Tom, with a pale, troubled face.

"We may as well go back to them," said Leaholme, starting again. "Nothing can be done here."

"How high do you think it comes at high water?" inquired Tom, as they joined the girls.

"I do not know," returned Leaholme, trying not to look anxious, as he met Bella's eager, frightened inquiries; "but what do you all say to having to meet the chance, and stay here till the tide is down again?"

"Oh, Lord Leaholme! And suppose it does come up and kill us?"

"If we stay, we stand the chance of that," he replied, with a tightening of his white lips, which she caught sight of under his mustache.

"Oh, don't let us have that chance!" she cried, while Lydia held her by the arm, and Marian watched the advancing waves with a moan of fear. "I'm sure the water comes up very high, and so are you sure; I can see it in your face. Oh, what shall we do?"

"Are you frightened, Hessie?" asked Alfy, keeping close beside her, but not quite sure whether this was not, after all, rather a jolly adventure.

"Yes," she answered quietly, looking out along the bright horizon. "We are such little things to be at the mercy of that great powerful sea. But there is One, Alfy, who holdeth

the sea in the hollow of His hand; and when I think of that I am not frightened. Can you think of it, dear?"

"No," whispered the child, a little awe-stricken, as the waves came tossing nearer to them, shutting them into the hollow of the cliffs.

"We must put you up as high upon the rocks as we can manage," said Leaholme. "Bring them, Lane." And he walked back a little way and climbed one sharp, uneven pinnacle of rock under the cliffs, dragging the boys up with him.

Poor Tom—his face white as death—had no need to call them; the girls were below the rock, close to Lord Leaholme at the first sound of his voice.

"All right, Lane; make a spring. Help Miss Berkeley up, Platt," he called to the baronet, who hovered about Hester with feeble words of encouragement, which she neither heeded nor needed. "Lane will take her midway. Now, Miss Berkeley, trust yourself to us entirely. You cannot climb this place without help, and I am waiting here for you."

"Need I trouble you?" asked Marian, excitedly; but, without answering, Sir Randal lifted her easily in his arms and consigned her to Tom, who fortunately was not required to do very much himself, except guide her to where Leaholme's strong, untiring arms were ready.

"Now, Miss Bruce," cried Sir Randal, "for God's sake, make haste!"

But Bella was close behind him; his hands could not but rest upon her. He lifted the small, plump, unresisting figure, while she besought him in a loud whisper to "take dear Lydia first." This time Tom managed so much better—not being, perhaps, so nervous about holding his own sister—that Leaholme need not have had to bear Bella's sinking form to a safe spot, if she had not felt called upon to lose all power and vitality before he could drop her.

"Now, Lydia," called Hester, "you and I are going."

Sir Randal had a hand on Hester's arm; a real anxiety was on his face as he glanced back once more to the waves that tossed in behind him. But Hester gave poor trembling Lydia a little push, and she came on with clumsy bashfulness into his arms. This was a weight for which he had been unprepared, and he fell back a step or two each time he tried to spring toward Tom. Lydia slipped again and again, but at last she was safe, and he muttered a little

between his closed teeth. Once more he sprung down, and Hester met him.

"Now I may take my most precious burden," he said in a longing whisper.

Hester recoiled involuntarily.

"I can go myself. Stand back a little, please."

His under-lip closed on the ends of his long mustache, his eyes grew passionately hot and red-looking, as they fixed themselves on her face; but the pretty, dauntless figure stepped up past him, and, preparing to climb, looked fearlessly up at Tom. Only for a second, then the ready, eager arms were round her; a hot, quick breath was on her cheek and neck; and she felt weak and powerless in Sir Randal's close and firm embrace. The proud, passionate tears rushed into her eyes, and when Leaholme bent from above to take her, she raised her arms to him with unconscious eagerness.

"Saved!" he whispered, in a voice of intense emotion.

"Saved, I thank God!"

The little group, keeping their places as firmly as they could upon the rock, looked down to see the spot where they had stood swallowed by the restless, hungry waves, and looked behind to see the precipitous cliff rise, high and clear, against the sky. No exit either way. There was a silence of some minutes among them—a thoughtful, earnest silence it must have been for all.

Sir Randal sat upon a little jutting point of rock, from which his legs hung, his own equilibrium too uncertain to allow him to help the others, but occasionally using the one hand which he did not require in balancing himself to make a sudden essay at steadying or assisting Hester, who stood near him upon a narrow, giddy little ledge, from which she had a hold for her little, firm right hand, while her left was laid on Alfy's shoulder, really to keep the child still and safe, professedly in acceptance of his offered support. Tom sat in the corner of the one hollow, where Marian and Lydia were coiled with their feet tucked under them, guarding them passively, and encouraging them now and then with a few very doubtful assurances of safety, and a face of great anxiety. Bella had been provided with a narrow little natural seat, below which there was a ledge for her feet, and on this ledge stood Leaholme, looking out to sea; Wattie clinging to one arm, the other held out to Bella now and then, when one of her sudden panics came on.

So they watched the tide rising, rising, until Lord Leaholme broke the silence, a new ring of excitement in his voice.

"All of you look out steadily to seaward, round the points east and west, and let the first who sees a boat shout lustily. I can see better a little way behind, and will signal from there. Wattie, stand steady there, old fellow, and take care of your sister. Don't look quite so alarmed, Miss Lane; we will do the best we can, and bear it the best we can; the summer nights are but short. Let go my sleeve, Wattie, dear."

"Shall we have to stay here all night, then, Lord Leaholme?" asked the child, before relinquishing his hold.

"That is the very best we can hope for," remarked Tom. "I hope that will be all we shall have to do."

"Shall we really, Lord Leaholme?"

"Not if we can help it, my dear little lad; but—if we cannot help it. Now take his hand, Miss Lane, firmly."

"But, Lord Leaholme, why do you move?" cried Bella, with a start. "Why not stay there? Oh, Douglas, do not go away!"

"Is this looking out for a sail, Miss Lane?" he asked, a little hotly. "If we do not all help, we cannot expect all to be saved."

She was a little ashamed when she saw the others so steadily and eagerly watching the boundaries of the little bay, and turned her head too. But presently the engrossing idea drew her restless eyes away again, and she looked round for him—round both ways—eager, anxious, frightened. Then the quiet, watching group was startled by a shrill and unrestrained cry—a shriek, rather—a shriek of utter, abject terror. Sir Randal raised himself as much as he could without losing his balance, and looked back, but turned again quickly, his heavy red mustache tight between his teeth, and his eyes bright and glittering. Tom moved his head round the two girls and looked up too; then silenced Bella with the deepest imprecation his young lips had ever framed. Marian buried her face on her knees, and sobbed aloud; Lydia followed her example still more noisily.

Hester had looked up, too, as the piercing cry rang over her head, tightening her hold upon Alfie, lest he should start. One word escaped her—the one name that bursts involuntarily from us in our agony or peril—and the still, pale face did not turn back again for a long time. At last the wide eyes drooped in their concentrated gaze, and laying her cheek

against the upright rock, her whole heart went up in breathless, longing prayer. Wattie, unheeding Bella's sobs, stood praying too, aloud, with a child's touching confidence and simplicity.

"Oh, Tom!" cried Bella, and the shrill tones echoed sharply among the rocks, "what will he do?"

"By heavens! you will kill him yourself, you little idiot!" hissed Tom, through his teeth, his face ghastly in its pallor. "Be silent, for pity's sake. Ah, my God! he has touched the rope!"

Then there was a hush among them like the hush of death, while the figure they watched—so small it looked at that giddy distance—so helpless, so unreal—guided itself by the old rope, slowly, cautiously, lightly, up the smoothest, most dangerous part of the whole ascent. One step more! Would the rope bear this strain? Heaven only knew how rotten it might be, and that distant speck was a man of six feet.

There was no hesitation: the last step was taken; the whole weight was given to the piece of broken rope—one spring, and there was a sound in the group below, as of one quick, sudden heart-beat.

Hester looked up with a wonderful light in her eyes, not to the spot where Leaholme had disappeared on the level ground above, but far higher, piercing with radiant gratitude the deep blue vault above him. And he—he stood bare-headed there one minute, though he knew they could not see him, and his lips stirred with a tremulousness which no eyes had ever seen upon the firm, proud mouth before in all his four-and-thirty years.

The time had dragged wearily—oh, so wearily!—to the cramped watchers on the rock, when a boat came round the corner into sight, manned hurriedly by an incongruous crew, but riding cheerily and steadily over the waves, and making straight toward the one prominent mass of rising rock. And when one of the crew, rising from his oar, waved his handkerchief for a moment, the signal was answered by a dozen eager hands.

A couple of sturdy fellows jumped out upon the rock and pulled the boat close by its chain, and Leaholme, dropping his oar, stood upright and looked up at the watchers, his face grand-looking in his simple thankfulness.

"Now, Lane, we must reverse our first order. Help our lady passengers down to me."

Though this was a much more difficult matter than the other had been, and even more dangerous, it was much more easily accomplished. Sir Randal and Tom were cool and quiet, thinking little of themselves just now, carefully and willingly acting in the spirit in which they had seen Leaholme act. Even Bella was subdued and silent, and only recalled her old spirit in time to smilingly congratulate and thank Sir Randal, as he carefully held her dress round her with one hand, and guided her and helped her with the other.

"Now, Hessie," called Tom, at last, "Sir Randal is waiting for you." "Always last!" he muttered, throwing Alf's cap after him into the boat.

Sir Randal was waiting—both hands held out, an unusual crimson flush upon his deep-lined face; a flush so eager and so pleading that Hester, in her gentle, humble mood, gave him one hand with her bright pretty smile. And, as he clasped the little steady fingers closely, in the gladness and gratefulness of that hour, he loved, for once, purely and unselfishly.

"Have you been very much frightened?"

Leaholme, in his white shirt-sleeves, had put her safely down into the boat; but held her still as he asked the question, looking down into her beautiful, brave eyes.

"Just once I was very frightened; all the time a little."

"I see," he answered, with a smile of perfect comprehension.

"Let me take your oar, Leaholme," insisted the baronet. "Your arms must ache no little."

"Will you? Thank you."

And Hester saw that, now the necessity for exertion was over, he was glad to resign his seat and lean back in a corner of the boat.

"Oh, Lord Leaholme," chirped Bella, "you have made yourself ill, and all for our sakes. Cannot you lie down comfortably in the boat? We will make room."

"To keep still and silent would be the best thing you could do," said Tom, as she began to bustle about.

"I will keep very still, Tom," she returned, plaintively; "but I cannot stand Lord Leaholme being ill."

"I am glad you can't," said Tom, sharply. "Sit it, please."

"We can easily move and give him room," began Lydia, at a sign from Bella.

"We are doing nothing for him," went on Bella, in a still more melancholy key, "and yet he preserved us all."

"Please don't talk of *preserving*, Miss Lane," said Leaholme, starting up; "think of the sufferings of poor little Wattie when you remind him of the tea for which he was ready two hours ago. What does Ruth think of your absence, I wonder, old fellow?"

"That we are drowned!" replied Wattie, diving under the pull the earl gave his hair.

"Drowned!"

"What do they think at home, I wonder?" said Bella.

"And at my home?" added Marian, consequentially.

"And I wonder," struck in Leaholme, with a comic mockery, "what they think at my home, in the Queen's dominions, where nobody cares one solitary farthing whether I am present or absent. Are you ready to resign, Platt?"

"When he does," spoke up Tom, heartily, "I am ready to take his place. We Cambridge rowers don't care to hide our talents. Come, Sir Randal, I want to show off."

But the baronet declined to "come," and pulled away as steadily and sturdily as any of the men.

"Lord Leaholme," said Wattie, presently, watching him as he leaned his elbow on the side of the boat and his head on his hand, "are you thinking how dreadful it was?"

"No," he answered, with a smile into the little, earnest face, "I was thinking something much more incomprehensible."

"What was it?" asked Hester, gently, as he looked up suddenly to meet her eyes.

"I was 'musing on the little lives of men, and how they mar that by their little feuds!'"

"We forget," she said, slowly, "that they are such little lives—except at such times as to-day."

"It is a pity, is it not?"

"At times they seem so long, and so full of wrong. Oh, do not talk of this to-day!"

He gazed, astonished, into her pained face, but did not say a word more, and presently the keel of the boat grated on the pebbly shore, and it was surrounded by eager spectators. A perfect crowd had collected to see the return of the boat which had been sent for in such haste, and to see, too, the Earl of Leaholme, who had actually, it was said, climbed the awful cliff beyond Boulder Point and rescued all his party.

Mr. and Mrs. Bruce were there in an agony of suspense, having returned from their drive to be greeted with the wild and varied story which was then going through its most exaggerated edition. The servants were there, Ruth and James especially crushed in the crowd, he consoling, she inconsolable. And not only were the waiters from the Queen's there, with innumerable hangers-on, but the landlord too, who had run down to see how much of this was fact about the earl, and who, it was observed, of his own accord, originated the cheer which swelled so jovially along the beach when the boat landed him.

The news had even penetrated down among the elms in Old street, and Pollie, too, had come to see the boat return. So one bright smile of greeting, Hester felt, was all for her, and it cheered her wonderfully.

What a gay dinner it was that night at Yrntoes House! They would not hear of separating, so the little boys came into dinner too, and Marian, Sir Randal, and Leaholme were easily persuaded to stay.

They lingered over the meal, while the fresh sea-air blew softly in upon them, and they talked of their adventure until those who had not been present seemed to feel it as intensely as those who had.

"Oh, papa," cried Bella, harping perpetually upon the one string, "you can never imagine how terrible it was. Can he, Lord Leaholme?"

"Never."

"But did we not feel terrible?" she continued, with a shudder.

"I felt just like the Ancient Mariner, and you exactly resembled the rest of the crew. Did not you, Miss Bruce?"

"Why? Because 'a thousand, thousand slimy things lived on; and so did I?'"

"Do not make me laugh over a serious subject, please; you know what I mean?"

"What does he mean, Hessie?" inquired her uncle, laughing, too. "Does he mean that you were

"As sad as sad could be,
And you did speak, only to break
The silence of the sea?"

"Yes, I did; but it is highly objectionable to hear you say it in that flippant manner, though one can expect no less; for a gentleman of England who sits at home at ease is pro-

verbially acknowledged to trouble himself very little upon the dangers of the seas."

"Lord Leaholme," interposed Mrs. Bruce, with a placid, admiring smile, "how did you feel when you reached the top of that terrible cliff?"

He shook his head, with a laugh in his handsome eyes. "I find it impossible to recall the sensation. I think I saw some sheep about, and I almost lost my hat—a personal injury which I should have been slow to forget. We are a nation proverbially proud and fond of our headquarters."

Hester looked up rather quizzically into the cool face opposite her (he nearly always managed to sit opposite her). There was some look in it to-day that kept her thoughts strangely busy; a look that made her wildly and wickedly wish that it had not been *he* who had saved her; a look that made her feel powerless to echo his ready laughter, because she seemed (ay, and against her will, too!) to read more than others could of the deep, grave thoughts below it.

"What else, Lord Leaholme?" asked Marian, still laughing.

"I wish I might eat my dessert in peace. Bruce, do come to the rescue. I have not had a single course in uninterrupted enjoyment. I feel mad with jealousy when I see how cunningly Miss Hester withdraws herself from the conversation in order to do justice to an enormous dinner."

"Can you spare me a peach from the dish before you?" said Hester, merrily ignoring the consciousness that he had been noticing how impossible she found it to do more than taste the rich, abundant dinner, and trying to convey to him the false idea that she fancied he had enjoyed his.

"You are evidently in a hurry to slip away and parade," he remarked, quaintly.

"Not to-night, I think."

"Suppose we all stay at home," put in Tom, who was really very tired.

"I advise it, indeed," assented his step-father; "you will be stared at most mercilessly if you go out to-night. Now, boys, you run off to bed at once. You have spent a day and a half since you got up."

"Oh, let us go to hear the band!" exclaimed Bella, eagerly. "Why should we stay at home? Who will come?"

Perhaps she had meant to turn to Lydia; but Lydia sat

beyond Lord Leaholme, and *his* eyes were the first to meet her inquiry.

"Not to-night, thank you," he said, with a laughing shake of his head.

"Sir Randal, will not you come and hear the band?" inquired Bella, the anticipation of being a small lion for once balancing the disappointment of not having Leaholme's company.

He bowed an almost careless assent, and Lydia eagerly followed Bella's example, as might have been, and was, expected.

Encouraged a little, but still with very slight hope, she appealed again to the earl. It would add so much to the *eclat* to walk with him. But that appeal was useless.

"I am afraid you are very tired, dear Bella," put in her mother, softly. "Had you not better stay at home and rest?"

"Oh, no, mamma, dear; but I will not stay out long; say just half an hour. Tom, will you come and fetch us then?"

"Not I, thanks," said Tom, with a conclusiveness there was no resisting. "The light of my countenance is denied, and the parade must be a howling wilderness. By Jove! how they will miss me!"

"Then go in pity to them," said Sir Randal.

"My pity has all been exhausted to-day on myself."

"Lord Leaholme," pleaded Bella, coaxingly, "will you make papa come for us in half an hour?"

"I will come myself, Miss Lane, if you will allow me," he said, courteously, taking the hint.

"Oh, thank you; but not if you are too tired."

"Very well."

That half hour seemed unusually long to Hester. Her uncle went out, and Mrs. Bruce sat, with eyes half closed, listening, but hardly speaking, while Hester talked, rather slowly and wearily, to Tom and Lord Leaholme.

Presently Leaholme rose, looking at his watch, and went out. Tom, leaning through the open window after he passed below, looked back at Hester as the band stopped playing suddenly.

"What's the matter there, I wonder?"

Hester gave a sudden start; for, with a hurried, clashing chord which was not quite harmonious, the instruments struck up instantly, "See the Conquering Hero Comes!" playing it quickly and jubilantly.

"Fools!" muttered Tom. "How he will hate to hear it!"

"Does he turn back?" asked Mrs. Bruce, coming to the window with a smile of inexpressible pride and delight.

"Turn back! not he. Bella's fault this is! What a little idiot she is sometimes?"

"This will please her very much," smiled his mother.

"Of course it will, and vex him just ~~as~~ much. What a ridiculous bother! And the people are staring at him with all their eyes, and he just looks as if he did not understand it."

"Of course he does understand it, dear."

"Of course, mother; he not being totally devoid of sense or eyes. He is acting that, of course; rather cleverly, too, as he would not turn back. Now the girls have come to him, and Bella is in her seventh heaven at least."

"Playing that for *him*," thought Hester, "for *him*?"

The shadows gathered softly, as other shadows deepened and deepened in the puzzled, wondering eyes. And when at last Bella's quick, gay voice came up from below, Hester slipped away.

CHAPTER XX.

A SCORPION'S STING.

"OH, dear, dear!" sighed Bella, from her low easy-chair, "how wretched to have a wet day for our last whole day in Aberswys! Is Lord Leaholme coming to dinner, mamma?"

"Yes, dear."

"That's a blessing, at any rate. Hessie, are you going out?"

"Presently," said Hester, looking from the book resting on her knee, through the window to the clouds beyond.

"I shall go in to see the Berkeleys. It is dreadfully dull here."

Hester bent over her book again, forgetting to wish that the sun would shine. Presently she was roused by a timid little voice from below. She leaned through the open window, for the rain had vanished, and nodded down at little Tottie.

"Miss Bruce, it isn't raining. Will you please to come out? somebody says."

Hester rose at once. Of course the somebody was Pollie. In a very few minutes the child, who waited at the door in

one of her long dreams, felt a little warm kiss on her forehead, and saw a water-proof figure waiting beside her.

"Which is the way to go to somebody, Tottie?"

"This way, please."

"But do you know, I think you ought not to be out at all on this kind of day," said Hester, seriously, as they walked on together.

"But I was out before; so when they asked me to come, of course I could," said the child, conclusively.

"Oh, being out before is the argument, is it? Who is that with your brother and my little cousins? Oh, I see now."

She had not known the earl at first, in the long Mackintosh and scavenger hat in which he had been out all the morning, independent of rain and wind, practicing with the men in the life-boat.

"I was telling Tottie that I thought she ought not to be out, Mr. Delahoyde," she began, more than ever coldly indifferent to the earl, "but I have changed my mind now. How deliciously fresh the air feels!"

At that moment Pollie came up with Alfy, and Hester smiled, understanding the plan very well.

"Well done, Tottie; you brought her famously," cried Alfy. "Now let us start."

"It is pleasant to have you for my last day, Pollie," said Hester. "Are we a pedestrian party?"

"If you do not object," said Leaholme, in his lightest, easiest tones, "we are going to see what Llanforda Church looks like on a week day."

They left the town quickly, the wind blowing boisterously against them, but causing them nothing but merriment. The girls were well equipped for the weather, and only laughed when their hats were beaten back and their hair tossed about. The few whom they met did not seem to enjoy it so much, and as they descended from the town they came upon a tiny, feeble old lady, battling very helplessly with the powerful gusts. Hugh delicately looked in another direction, but Leaholme left Pollie's side. "I think," he said, courteously, raising the ugly tarpaulin hat, "that if you will let me give you my arm, you will find it easier to fight the wind." He put down the disarranged shawl with almost a woman's quiet touch, and with eager relief the little feeble figure clung to his arm.

They sauntered on to allow him to overtake them, and just as he did so Wattie raced back to them.

"Oh, Hessie, we've found a serpent! Come and see."

She ran with him, always ready to join in the children's excitement or amusements, and the others came up to find her and the children gazing timidly down upon a coiled-up adder.

"I ought to kill him," began Hugh, hesitatingly.

"But your heart is too tender," said Leaholme, coolly.

"Just move a little, all of you."

One blow, and the creature "lay dead in his bed," as Alfie said. One blow, though, which seemed to strike Hester, too.

"There," he said, laughingly,

" 'Though in the Decalogue we find
The mandate written, Thou shalt not kill,
Yet there are cases when we must.' "

Two hot, red spots burned in Hester's cheeks, though the wind blew coldly against them in its rush. Would he never cease recalling her to that one deed?

"Look behind," said Pollie, turning. "Is not that a stormy scene? The sea troubled; the clouds wild and scattered, and the mountains looking as sullen as they can. There is no look of rest anywhere."

"A little, up there," replied Hester, looking where the clouds had parted, "but a very little."

"Enough for us, Miss Bruce," said Lord Leaholme, quietly, "and for many a hungering heart besides. Now look over there again."

They all gazed in silent admiration, for from the mountains beyond them stretched a brilliant rainbow, resting on the tumultuous sea. It was the kind of picture which in its splendor and promise, dim eyes might yearn for in the stifling, busy streets. A picture that lived still in Hester's memory when she felt that the rainbow tints had faded.

"Think of trying to paint *that*!" said Pollie, while Hester gazed in speechless wonder.

As they descended the valley, Hester noticed a very tired look on Tottie's little face, and an unconscious slackening of the gleeful step.

"I cannot go on, I fear, Mr. Delahoyde," she said. "If you and Pollie will excuse me, and Tottie will keep me com-

pany, I will stay here until your return, or walk very slowly to meet you. Will you wait with me, Tottie?"

"Yes," answered the child, coming to her side at once.

This walk Hester knew was very pleasant to Pollie; almost more than pleasant to Hugh, and by no other means could she have gained their consent to stay with Tottie. Now—thinking it was for her own pleasure—they could not attempt to deter her. Pollie begged to stay, too, but she interrupted her.

"Of course, if you offer to stay, I must come on."

So Pollie smiled and went.

"There may be another adder about," said Leaholme, coolly, "so I shall wait and see."

He saw Hester's face cloud; but he sat himself down unconcernedly on the low stone wall at the side of the road, took off the Mackintosh and threw it down beside him, then, perching Tottie on his knee, began to talk gayly to her; while Hester, seated too, really took the rest she had not needed. So tired the little one was, that at last—soothed by the low, pleasant tones—she laid her head down on Leaholme's shoulder, and closed her eyes contentedly. Holding her so, he looked at Hester.

"Shall I sing her to sleep, Miss Bruce?"

"If you li—please."

She had tried to answer carelessly, but something in the sight of the little resting child rebuked her unaccountably.

"How they are all blown about!" she went on, with a little nervousness. "Look at them."

"Yes, I am looking at them—and thinking of them. Am I to sing?"

"Yes," she said, almost against her will.

The rich, clear voice was low and softened; but lost none of its wonderful pathos as he sung that most touching of Mendelssohn's songs, with words, "Oh, wert thou in the cauld blast!" He repeated the last two lines slowly, his face hidden as he looked down on the sleeping child:

"The brightest jewel in my crown,
Wad be my queen, wad be my queen."

Tottie had had a refreshing little sleep when they returned, and though her brother laughed at her laziness, he looked very anxiously into her wee pale face.

The storm had abated now, and the walk home was calm and quiet.

As they passed along Old street, Pollie stopped; and when the earl caught sight of Mrs. Goldsmith netting in the little bow-window, he called up to know if they might all come in. So for a few minutes they crowded the neat sitting-room, and filled it with merriment; Leaholme's innate, easy courtesy and quaint jests with the two old ladies giving them all a prolific subject of conversation for months to come. Not till long afterward could Aunt Phyllis laugh quite heartily over the frightened turn it had given her to think that the Earl of Leaholme was really on the stairs, coming to sit in that poky room.

Poor little Aunt Phyllis! It was just as well, perhaps, that she could not guess for how long this "grand young nobleman," on whom her eyes rested a little awfully, would look back upon that day, with its visit to the narrow sitting-room in Old street, and prize its memory beyond all that the wealth and power and rank which made him the envied and admired of all Aberswys could give him. This were a different world, little Phyllis, if the men who stood in its high places knew nothing of the restless, wayward cravings which stir and sway our lives.

And Hester, in her youth and beauty, the prettiest, daintiest picture any eyes need rest upon, walked home that day, thinking—while many a plain and happy girl cast jealous glances into the winning face—that life was very wide and lone and dreary, when the home-love that was life's very breath had left it. It lay around her like the unbrightened sea, she thought, and that looked now just like a white, cold grave. True, there were a few boats out; but those afar were very blots upon its surface, and those below her flapped their soiled, discolored sails with a motion that breathed even less of life than utter stillness would have done.

It was dinner-time when Hester and the boys reached Yrnteos House—Lord Leaholme following them in a few minutes—and Mr. Bruce, who had been obliged to be at home during the last few days, had just arrived from Churleigh to travel back with his wife and children on the morrow. He jokingly told me that, as they were all so glad to see him, of course they were glad to leave Aberswys; but that was not true of any of them.

Bella mourned unfeignedly the prospect of leaving this gay, sociable life, where she need never find dullness or solitude. Lydia mourned the prospect of parting from Bella, and hav-

ing to entertain strangers again in her mother's house, without the shelter of Bella's gorgeous, fluttering, self-satisfied little wings. Tom mourned the rapid flight of this vacation. Mrs. Paley and her daughter mourned that the very eligible acquaintances they had made they could not easily keep.

Hester mourned she hardly knew what. She supposed it must be that she was leaving behind her a dear friend and the sea she loved, and taking with her still that one thick cloud that hung above her path.

The meal was hardly over when Tom left the table, saying he had an appointment with Sir Randal Platt.

"Do you call yours a sea-side dinner, then?" asked Mr. Bruce; "I thought your appetite was insatiable here."

"So it is, sir; and I have dined famously."

"I should like to know how such dinners became famous. Hessie is following your example, too. Have you found out that sea air does not suit digestion, dear?"

"It suits mine wonderfully, Uncle Alf. I have had two appetites in one all the time I have been here."

"I have never seen it."

"Ah! papa," said Bella, shrugging her shoulders with rather a spiteful smile, "you have not seen her, as I have, lolling on the rocks with another person" (Bella had an inimitable way of saying *person*), "eating an enormous hunch of cake."

"Well done, Hessie," laughed Tom, as he left the room. "Go on and prosper."

"But I can't," said Hester, funnily. "I shall have no other opportunity."

"How did it taste?" asked Leaholme, anxiously.

"Beautiful—flavored by sea-breezes. Oh, I was hungry, and I did enjoy it!"

"Greedy, was it not?"

"Yes, you hardly ever saw a larger piece."

Now this was not exactly the way in which Bella had intended her spice of information to be taken; and, having intended discomfiture, she hardly appreciated the hearty laugh which followed.

"Leaholme," said Mr. Bruce, gravely, "you have no idea of the anxious inquiries that were made me about your return. One or two of your enlightened people asked me when was the lord coming, until I thought they mistook me for Dr. Cumming."

"Oh, Alfred, for shame!"

"A fact, my dear."

"Pray, who gave me this highly suggestive title, Bruce?" asked the earl.

"I do not see why I should be made to furnish particulars."

"Some of the alms-house women, I know, papa," said Bella, gayly.

"Perhaps so. Hessie, the Moores seem anxious, too, about your return. I said you would ride over in one of your wanderings. Are you going to wander now?"

"I shall not stray far to-night, uncle."

She took down her scarlet carriage-cloak and put it on over her dress, feeling strangely chill; then tilting her hat low over her eyes, she went out alone.

It was growing late, but the Parade looked crowded still; so, avoiding it, she hurried along until she found a quiet spot upon the cliffs where she could stop and rest.

Faintly from the pier came the music of the band; the well-known operatic melody seemed to have a new voice to-night, a reality in its passionate, pleading cry which went straight to her heart, and shook it with a new, unutterable longing. "I know I have been restless and impatient all my life," she murmured to herself, "but never as now."

She pushed back her hat and stood upright upon the rocks. "Oh, if the wind would come dashing against me, beating upon me!" she cried, in a passionate whisper; "if it would toss this heavy hair away from my hot face, and give me some sharp outward feeling that should deaden this fierce and angry pain at my heart!"

But the breath that touched her face was very gentle and tender, and her cry of longing and despair fell calmed and softened on the peacefulness of the summer night.

Hester did not know how long she had been out when Lord Leaholme found her in the same quiet spot, sitting quite still, and looking rather drearily out across the sea.

"They have been wondering at home where you could be, Miss Bruce."

"Have they?"

"Will you come?"

"Yes."

She rose immediately, but he had not turned; so she stood a minute watching a tiny fishing-boat as it floated idly over

the waters toward them, looking no bigger and no more in earnest, she thought, than the toy yacht that Alf sailed in the fountain at home. And while the sea lay green and still and boundless there along the straight horizon, boundless as her girlish dreams had been—(had been! Ah! little Hester, with your deep-learned wisdom of twenty years!)—only one spot was moved and troubled. Over the shallow rocks a little way from the shore two little white waves tossed and sparkled, following each other with a clashing, laughing sound, the placid world of water around them unruffled and unmoved by their eagerness and their unrest. Hester turned her eyes away wearily.

“Are they gulls, those two that look so white and shining far away?” she asked, breaking the silence, “quite still there on the sea—two close together?”

“I think not,” he answered; “I think they must be two figures in a boat. We shall see as they come nearer.”

So they waited a little and watched, but the two white specks came no nearer, and Hester, in her last look, saw them, seemingly in perfect rest, far away. Why were things always in twos? she wondered, in wayward impatience, even.

Ah! that was good. The two little eager, upheaving waves were gone. The tide had risen, and they were lost in the unruffled surface of the quiet ocean.

“We cannot decide what those are, after all,” he said, as they walked on. “They are as still there as two little white spirits with folded wings.”

“You do not look so glad to be leaving here as I fancied you would, Miss Bruce,” he added, presently.

“Why did you fancy I should be?”

“I do not know, except that it *was* a fancy, and therefore had its own way. So little makes you happy sometimes, so much is powerless to do so at others, that I can never judge—only fancy.”

“There is no occasion to fancy at all,” said Hester, listlessly. “I am happy anywhere—as far as I know happiness.”

“And as far as you *have* known it?”

Her lips quivered sadly, but her first thought was an angry one that he should dare to recall the past to her.

“We need not speak of that, my lord.”

“Hessie, my child,” he said, very kindly, “I fancy we have all to bear within us, for a time, some unsatisfied—often

unsatisfiable—longing. I trusted you had not known it yet, and I cannot bear to think you have. I know the bitterness of the pain so well, that if any power of mine would guard you——”

She interrupted him with steady coldness.

“Surely you have every hope and ambition satisfied; surely you have everything?”

He smiled. “‘Everything’ are wide, fathomless words. I have wealth—perhaps I have many more things; I would not make my blessings less: but we need not discuss that. The one thing I have longed for from my very childhood I have never had.”

“What is that?”

“The love of those I love.”

“Oh, Lord Leaholme,” she cried, a strange dimness in her eyes, “look how your people love you; and—everybody—almost!”

“Do my people love me?” he asked, with one of his low laughs; “then I thank them from my heart; but I mean something different from that. You understand—child as you are. But”—his voice changed suddenly—“why should I speak to you of this longing of mine for what I shall never win? I am going to kill it presently.”

“How?” The word came involuntarily from Hester’s lips.

“By seeking that one almost greatest blessing in my Father’s gift, ‘a heart at leisure from itself.’”

There was no crowd as they returned, only a few stragglers here and there. Two of these both Hester and the earl knew at a glance, as they loitered toward them from the hotel steps—Tom and Sir Randal, arm-in-arm.

“Oh, I wish—I wish——” began Hester, unthinkingly, then stopped.

“I suppose, after Tom’s stay here is over,” Leaholme said, so carelessly that Hester felt relieved that he had not understood her, “he will see no more of Sir Randal Platt.”

Tom’s words of greeting broke upon this speech.

“Where have you been, my dear?”

She marked keenly the quavering, uncertain voice, though every sense seemed to be absorbed in her sad, questioning gaze into his flushed, smiling face.

“Where are you come from, Tom?”

“I? Oh, from going to and fro on the Parade, and from walking up and down it.”

"Hush, Tom, hush! Are you ready to come home?"

"Well, we were going to have a hand at billiards. I want to win back——"

"But you cannot go alone, Miss Bruce," said Leaholme to her, breaking in upon Tom's words with a motive she understood.

"Oh, Hessie shall not go alone," returned Tom, hastily. "I will come and take care of you, of course, dear."

"Thank you."

"I am only waiting to leave your cousin in your charge, Lane," said the earl, in his easy, genial tones.

"All right, Leaholme. I am ready. You have been—a—straying, as usual, have you, Hessie?"

"Yes."

She held her little shaking hand to the earl, and then politely and simply offered it to Sir Randal. It was not too dark for her to see the long, searching look he gave into her face, nor the triumphant smile with which he answered Leaholme's cold good-night.

"Good-night, Lane," he said then, tapping Tom's shoulder with his cane, and bringing a silly smile to his sleepy face. "Don't look so pale and wan, young lover; not *quite* so pale and wan."

This was the first time Hester had ever seen Tom so, and in her earnestness she did not hesitate to walk close beside him, clinging almost appealingly to him. He talked slowly, brokenly, all the way; but—even as he was—he must needs have been silenced could he have seen the grieved disappointment on her face, and have marked how pained was her own silence.

"Here we are, dear," he said, as they reached the door. "I'm sorry we're at home already."

"Tom, Tom——" She had crossed her hands upon his shoulders, and now, in the gaslight, he could see the piteous, deprecating sorrow of the wistful, pleading eyes that looked into his. "Oh, Tom! why have you been tempted by Sir Randal Platt to lower and disgrace yourself like this?"

"Like which?"

"Oh, Tom," she said, with a shudder, "do you remember that the wisest man who ever lived said of this hateful wine which you have been so despicably influenced by, that at the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder?"

"Hush, dear. I have not had much."

"Do not go with him again. Oh, come with me instead, dear Tom."

"But you won't—~~a~~—won't always have me; else you know I like it best of all."

"Never when you are untrue to yourself, and a coward, as you have been to-night, but always, always, when you are your own true self, dear Tom."

He looked rather sorrowful, but could not find quite the words he wanted.

"We have missed our tea, of course," she added, cheerfully; "let us take our candles now and go, Tom. Good-night. Here is yours." When he had left her and gone upstairs, she went back to shut the glass door, lingering over it somewhat longer than she need have done. Yet it was not a bright or cheering prospect that greeted her tired eyes. On her left, the old castle ruins stood weirdly up against the dull gray sky, on her right, the light foam rose and beat against the dark mass of rock, fading and melting in a million tiny white flakes.

The lights upon the pier burned clear and steady to-night; but their reflections in the water down below were blurred and dim and tremulous, she thought, just as if she saw them through her tears. Yet such a little space between. Oh, such a little space!

CHAPTER XXI.

GOOD-BYE.

THE last day in Aberswys. Hester felt there was a sadness in the thought, just that dim foreshadowing which always broods upon the word, and will do until we reach that one Great Last which we are going to meet. Hester thought this as she sat in the hot little sitting-room in Old street, saying good-bye to Pollie; at least preparing to say it, for at present Pollie was very busy talking of something else, kneeling beside Hester's chair with a great delight in her gentle face.

"Really, Hester? Will you really, really come?"

"Indeed I will; and you have no idea how I shall look forward to it between this day and that."

"And you will be there for our—New Year's party?"

Pollie could not help smiling as she asked it, and Hester laughed.

"I believe there is something comical about that party; is there?"

"I will tell you when you come. New Year's Day is on a Thursday next year, Hessie."

"Then I will come on Wednesday, and stay over Sunday, if Mrs. Goldsmith lets me."

"Thank you, dear." Pollie's face suddenly grew very red. "Hessie, suppose you do not like it," she stammered; "our house is small, and our ways are very simple. And you have had things so different. I am not speaking of now, but your own home was——"

"Such a happy one, dear Pollie," she said, the old shadow falling over her eyes, "that I know yours will remind me of it. Are you always going to be so proud, little Miss Goldsmith?"

"The poor are generally inclined to add to their natural misfortunes by being proud, aren't they? But it does not hurt anybody."

Mrs. Goldsmith and her sister came in just then, and almost shyly renewed their invitation. It was not only readily and gratefully accepted, but to their intense astonishment—humbly too—then Hester bid them a loving good-bye, giving the last kiss to Pollie.

After looking back at every two or three steps all down the street, and answering the nodding face at the window, Hester turned into one of her favorite spots among the rocks, that she might take her last look at the sea she so passionately loved.

Though below her it lay dull and cloud-shadowed, it shone and glittered on the far horizon; and she longed, with one of her unreasoning, inexplicable longings, that before she left that spot the sunlight should have come to meet her, and brightened this gloomy tract that lay so near her feet.

There was an unaccountable dreariness in the girl's heart which sought for some outward cause or influence.

"If I could only just leave it," she said, raising her face sadly to the sky, "just leave it all to Him who, of course, rules it all; who has ruled it before it troubled me; who will rule it when my troubles are gone forever; if I could leave it all to Him, I should have no care, no harass, and should not be so gloomy and discontented. He alone spreadeth out these beautiful heavens, and treadeth on the waves of that mighty sea; yet I—this little speck upon its

shore—trouble and vex myself about the things that are in His hand. I will try and leave it all to Him. I will try, and try, until I do—He helping me—and I may win what I so sorely need, ‘a heart at leisure from itself.’ Oh, it would be a great thing to have, even though it was he who dared to speak of it! I fear I must go now. What will Uncle Alf say if I am late in leaving here, as I was in coming?”

But descending the jagged rock was very tiring in the heat, so at the bottom she sat down to rest, singing softly to herself for fear of the gloomy thoughts finding their way back again.

Presently, along the beach, sauntering with Bella; and at sight of the quiet figure, half sitting, half lying upon the stones, a glad thrill ran through him. He stopped, leaning against the rock above her, and looking down upon her quizzically, so intently, too, that he could see how she was chafing at his presence, and how the great dark eyes, so warm and lustrous in their look upon the sea, were never raised to him at all, even with their old radiant scornfulness. He noticed this, but with no surprise; for the pain her scorn and her indifference cost him was a familiar old pain now.

They did not ask her to walk with them, and she did not offer; but it was not from any wish she had to be alone still longer, for when she caught sight of her uncle on the shore, scrutinizing a distant vessel through his opera-glasses, she went up to him almost eagerly.

“Uncle Alf,” she began, rather suddenly, when he put up the glasses and turned to walk in with her, “do you think if people’s pasts could speak they would always rebuke people—or only sometimes?”

He laughed at her vague question and anxious face.

“Hard to tell, dear? I should say cases varied. Why?”

“Because, Uncle Alf,” she said, slowly, “will you wish me many happy returns of the day? It is—my birthday.”

“Your birthday, dear? Why did you not tell me before? I like to keep all my children’s birthdays,” he said, tenderly. “How old are you?”

“Twenty, uncle. What a great deal *might* be done in twenty years!”

“A great deal. A little girl *might* be born and grown up; ay, and ‘woo’d and married and a’.’ It is not too late to drink your health yet; but you ought to have told us this morning, dear.”

“I’m afraid I hoped some one would know, uncle, and

then felt hurt because they did not," she said, wearily. "It is very silly of me. Uncle Alf"—she nestled nearer to him, and whispered low, with a lump rising in her throat—"no one is near us; just pray God bless me once, and kiss me as my own father used—would have done."

Only the poor little lonely heart knew whether it was as her own father would have done; but both the kiss and the blessing were kindly and lovingly given.

And still the sea lay bright and silvery far away; and still the shadows brooded between.

And thus they looked their last on Aberswys.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CLOUD ACROSS THE LAKE.

THE apples lay thick upon the orchard grass, bright red and yellow spots upon the green; yet from the boughs of the laden trees above, the rich, ripe fruit drooped heavily. The summer had reached the glory of its maturity; its broad, brave smile rippled over the sunny waters, and the trembling, golden fields; its song of glad thanksgiving, its laugh of full content, rose from the valleys standing thick with corn. Rose to the orchard on the hill-side where, under a tender, shadowy, gnarled old tree, sat Hester and the little boys regaling on apples; while Tom, with his back to the next tree, seemed buried in his book.

"You have no memory at all, Alf," laughed Hester, aiming the remains of her last apple over the hedge, "or you would remember that there is no more ending after the prince goes into his own kingdom and shuts the door on the princess. You are always wanting another volume to every story I tell you. And I wonder what more you could desire to hear of a beautiful princess who kisses a swineherd? In my old German copy of the book there is a most telling picture, Alf, of the prince, in a high spiked crown, standing behind the door of his kingdom, peeping round it cheerfully to enjoy the tears of the princess before he bolts her out. Why, what further ending would you require?"

"I never like the end to come, either," sighed Wattie. "I always wanted you to begin over again at the very beginning whenever you say, 'So, that's the end.'"

"I wonder whether Tom would like to go back to the very beginning, for he has evidently reached the end," said Hester, as Tom shut his book with a bang and sprung up.

"I would not go back to the beginning for forty thousand pounds," he said, laughing. "What do you think they do with her?"

"Her being, of course, the heroine, I know what they do with her—if 'they' means the author."

"Isn't it a shame?"

"Yes," said Hester, coolly, as she took a beautiful little Ripstone from her lap and threw it up into his outstretched hand; "when one's existence seems by nature destined to flow in a smooth, unshaken placidity, it is a shame for 'them' to excite our sympathies for 'her,' by leaving her life to be imagined as long years of cruel loneliness—her heart cruelly desolate. You will be utterly miserable now, Tom, until you forget her—five minutes hence."

"You told me the story haunted you for a week after you had finished it."

"So it did; but I am a woman, you know."

"Still, you don't feel as I do about this, for—for—(run in with those books, boys, and then come back and fetch us)—for I think you do not love any one person particularly—do you, Hessie?"

"I do," said Hester, composedly. "I love myself very particularly."

"But I mean," he went on, eagerly, sitting beside her on the grass, and leaning on his elbow to look into her face; "I mean, you do not love as that girl loved the queer little professor who was drowned on his way home to her."

"No, no," cried Hester, quickly. "I never did. I think I never shall."

"You think you never shall be what people call 'in love?'"

"I believe that is arrived at by a tumble, Tom, which our eyes cannot foresee and avoid," she answered, gravely shaking her head. "No one would deliberately walk into that very bubbly state of existence, surely. No, I never was in love in my life."

"Then you cannot imagine what it is," said Tom, gravely.

"Oh yes, I can," she returned, refuting the idea with a most anxious and wise expression of countenance. "Ezra Moore has a Book of Dreams, which I studied intently one day, and at the end was a list headed 'Symptoms of being in

Love.' One I particularly remember. It was, 'An involuntary holding of the head on one side in presence of the object.' Another was, 'An impossibility to prevent stammering when addressing the object.' Take your elbow off my dress. It is a fact, Tom; I read them in a printed book, and I did not recognize the symptoms in myself, so"—the pretty laugh broke off in a despondent sigh—"so I suppose I am not in love. How grave you look, Thomas; such a face is an insult to nature to-day. I should like to go down and help those women to glean."

"Alfy says you and he did help them yesterday,"

"So I did; but I am rather afraid of you to-day. Give me a pencil; I am going to sketch the man and the reaping machine. Does it give you an idea of an ancient Briton going about in his war-chariot?"

"It is like," laughed Tom, "but the bearded grain is rather more harmless hewing down than the bearded warriors."

Hester put her sketch-book on her knees, and holding her pencil idle, gazed down into the busy fields for many minutes. Then she sketched in a little picture of the reapers, touching it afterward here and there, until it showed a little procession of Britons going to war, the single chariot drawn up suddenly in their midst. And then her fingers restlessly strayed to the next page, and drew there herself and Tom, with something so wonderfully characteristic in the attitudes and figures that they would have been recognized anywhere, even if the faces had both been hidden, as hers was. It was all quickly and thoughtlessly done; but those two pages, which Tom tore out to keep, he kept among his few valued treasures until the pencil-marks were worn and blurred; until the eyes that looked upon them were dim with something besides old memories.

"Tom," reproved Hester, "I never gave you permission to cut the leaves out of my sketch-book. Such behavior is actionable."

"I must keep this page, Hessie. Think who would value it as I do."

"I cannot think," she answered, coolly; but a soft color rose slowly to her very hair, as she let Tom help her from her grassy seat, and walked through the orchard beside him.

"What a very happy summer this has been, Hessie," he said, rather suddenly, as he held the gate open, and waited

for her to come dawdling through. "I never had such a happy one before."

"I regret the deficiency of appreciation which has characterized your youth," she answered, seriously, handing him a "fighting cock," and preparing for a contest.

"But Hessie, I really mean that this has been the happiest summer of my life," he continued, earnestly looking at her, while he gave her grass a dainty stroke with his own.

"Bad, Tom; you should hit nearer the head. Knowing you pretty well by this time, I can comfortably prophesy that it will not be the happiest summer you ever will spend. Don't look so grave. Get a bantam and try, and I will keep my proved veteran. Don't look at me; look at the pugilists. I think, Tom, that next summer you will probably be employing yourself in a manner highly opposed to this present diversion, and will think you never spent such a happy summer before. The year after that your occupation will, I dare say, be thoroughly different again, and you will murmur that you are happier than you have ever been before. Was not that a splendid stroke of mine?"

"I hope it may be so, Hessie. I am so glad you think it will, because, you know——"

"I know you so well, Tom. Yes," she interrupted, "you will find enjoyment whether you seek it or not, and I do not think you fail in the trying, either."

"I declare, there's Leaholme with mother!" cried Tom, as they turned in sight of the house. "Do you think *he* tries to find enjoyment in life, you little Ellen Graham?"

"Who is Ellen Graham?"

"The lady who advertises an account of all your weak points for eighteen stamps."

"Then you owe me eighteen stamps."

"Well, answer me about Leaholme."

"I shall require thirty-six, then. Yes, he tries to enjoy it, I think, but he never, never will; not bravely, brightly, and honorably. I am going in at this door to put on my habit."

"To avoid Leaholme, you mean. Well, I will go round and see about the horses. Don't be long."

When Hester came out again, dressed for riding, Mrs. Bruce, Bella and Lydia still stood on the steps talking to Lord Leaholme, who lounged against the stone balustrade, in his sporting-dress, with one hand balancing his gun upon the gravel. He was telling Tom, who stood near, how he had

come round to beg them all to go to Wye next day, and how the ladies had consented.

"I think a picnic at Wye Abbey is my greatest pleasure of all the summer," chimed in Bella.

"Delightful!" echoed Lydia.

"I am looking forward to it with all my mind's eye," said Tom, silently wondering whether his new shooting-suit would look as well on him as this old one did on the splendid figure opposite him.

"And you, Miss Bruce?" asked the earl, looking up to where she had stopped upon the steps, and stood with a "Certainly not" written in every feature of her face.

"Leaholme," called Mr. Bruce, coming out to them at that moment, "I intend to accept your invitation to Wye, and give myself a holiday to-morrow in mind and body. I am equally tired of books, boys, and builders."

"Thank you, Bruce, it is so pleasant not to be refused. You say 'Yes,' too, Miss Bruce?"

"Uncle Alf," she pleaded, putting her hand on his arm, and longing to be guided by something that was not her own will, "had not I better stay at home?"

"Certainly not, dear. Come, of course. It will do you good in every way."

Her lip curled a little as she turned a white, vexed face to Leaholme.

"Thank you. I will come, too."

The scarlet rushed to the very roots of his hair, and a hasty answer rose to his lips; but there it died, whether it was of scorn or pleasure. He said, very calmly, and without looking at her:

"Thank you, Bruce, for giving me another guest." Then he turned to Alf with easy *nonchalance*. "Remember, Alf, that you and Wattie are particularly expected."

"Oh, yes, indeed, Lord Leaholme. Mamma told us; but we didn't know Hessie was coming. Ma did not tell us so."

"Naturally," replied the earl, with cold, quiet politeness, though his eyes flashed a little; "she has only just consented."

Bella glanced across at her mother, whose face was impenetrable, then asked the earl what sport he had had.

"You will see in a few minutes," replied Leaholme, watching one of his keepers as he came up with the game. "I want Mrs. Bruce to judge for herself."

"You are not so keen after it this year as you were last," said Bella; "I remember well how you enjoyed it then."

"I should very much like to know," put in Mrs. Bruce, softly, "why you neglected the grouse this year. Was it out of pity for them?"

"Mrs. Bruce thinks my heart very soft, does she not, Miss Dyott?" he answered, turning to Lydia, with a laugh; "but she could not have been wider of the mark, I fear. It was more selfishness than pity, as far as I can understand the reason myself."

"Will you arrange about to-morrow, please, Lord Leaholme?" exclaimed Bella.

"Yes. Whom may I drive?"

"Do you really mean that you will come over yourself for some of us? Oh, I should—I mean I do think your carriages more comfortable than anything."

"Then, I may offer you the seat beside me?"

"Thanks very much! Tom, you must drive Lydia."

"I fail to perceive the 'must,'" he muttered.

"How are the children going?" asked Leaholme.

"I suppose they will want to ride their ponies."

"And Miss Bruce?"

"She will want to ride with them, I presume," said Bella, looking coldly up at her.

"Do, Hessie!" cried the boys, eagerly. "Do! we want to show you all about the places."

"Yes," said Hester, absently.

"Nonsense, dear," interrupted Tom, in his most patronizingly gentle way, "you are not going to spoil the pleasure of a *fete* by encumbering yourself with a habit!"

"Hessie doesn't like the brougham," said Alfie, readily; "she always has her back to the horses. I shall walk with her. I'll show her lots of nice things on the way."

"Yes. I should like to walk," said Hester, slowly.

"Do you know that it is five miles to the nearest lodge?" cried Tom, wondering.

"But only three over the fields our way," put in Wattie.

"I would rather walk," she repeated, secretly hoping that to do so would delay her arrival, and hating the thought of it in every way. "I can see the country, too."

"Less distinguishable from the height of four-wheel. Are you a good walker, Miss Bruce?"

"Yes, my lord," said Hester, the sadness creeping into her eyes against her will, "it is less tiring than many things."

"True. It is—and pleasanter."

"You must come with me," said Tom, "or I will not drive at all."

"I fail to perceive the 'must,'" mimicked Hester, coldly smiling.

"I shall walk too, then."

"You would never get there, I believe, even if you started," she said, with a little laugh: "keep your own place, Tom. Let us each follow our own inclination."

"I do not believe that your inclination——"

"Yes; my inclination walks," she interrupted, "and I intend to follow its example."

So they walked, Alfie and Hester, with Wattie beside them on his pony. And a pleasant, merry walk they had.

"If we go our way, the prettiest and the nearest," said Alfie, strong in his new position of guide and guardian, "we shall turn into the woods presently, and come out at the farther end of Wye Park, close to the lake and the ruins. Here, you can see the way, Hessie, from the top of this bank."

As they stood on the slope, looking across the magnificent Wye woods, just within sight of them, the carriages passed lightly and rapidly along the turnpike road. Hester caught sight of Bella in her brilliant summer dress; and, sitting high beside her as he drove, the Earl of Leaholme. Looking at him, Hester breathed an involuntary little sigh of relief, that she was not Bella sitting there so close to him.

Then came Tom, driving the phaeton lazily and gracefully; very lazy and graceful himself in his light picnic costume. Below him Lydia's white feather danced in the breeze, and below that Hester caught sight of a very placid, happy face.

The great, roomy, old-fashioned britzka came behind with the elder ladies in it, Mr. Bruce driving the grays, with a servant beside him.

"Why, they didn't take the brougham, after all!" exclaimed Wattie, watching astonished; "and you like the britzka, Hessie, don't you?"

Hester had watched them all pass with a kind of restless intentness; but as Wattie spoke, she unconsciously stooped and kissed the little fellow's loving face in a strange, aching loneliness which she could not comprehend. They had a long walk before them yet; and before they reached the ruined

abbey the driving party had dismounted, and were beginning to feel thoroughly at home in the magnificent grounds; examining and admiring to their hearts' content—more than to the heart's content of one of them. Other guests were coming from other quarters; and when Wattie cantered on to the house to leave his pony, he met them in gay, laughing, strolling groups.

"Shall we go and examine the ruins a bit before we join the others, Hessie?" asked Alf, when they were left.

"Yes, dear," she said, glad to delay her arrival among the guests, and glad to keep away from his house a little longer.

It was a wonderful old place, that ruined abbey, standing between the grand, majestic woods, and the wide, still, glistening waters which lapped slowly and lazily the thick sedge that fringed the borders of the lake.

"Let us get up here. I should like to stand on that tower, Alf. Is it safe?"

"Oh, sure to be. Come, I will help you."

And Hester, flushed and out of breath, leaned over the broken battlements, looking round her delightedly.

"Here's Lord Leaholme, just under us."

Hester heard the pleased tone of the child's speech, but she herself felt a heavy disappointment which she tried in vain to hide, as she looked still into the distance, hoping he would pass on. When Alf hastened down to fetch him, she saw that he sent the child running out of sight, back on the way he had himself come. Then she heard the firm, light footsteps mount the steps and stop beside her, and there followed an odd little pause.

"Well, as the old monks generally chose where to pitch their tents, they made a grand mistake here, did they not, Miss Bruce?" Leaholme said at last.

"Yes; it is not beautiful here. The river is so far away there—at least it seems so—and this eyrie lake is no substitute."

"It was a grand old abbey, too, once on a time; but I think the monks here must have had just the same beauty and want of beauty without as they had within—the same solitude; the same heavy, lonely strength, and shrinking, isolated weakness about their lives within and without."

"Yes. I cannot fancy a broad and heavenly sunlight steeping this shadowy spot in wide warm radiance, and I cannot fancy a heaven-born love for our fellow-creatures (not coming

next to our love for our God, but being part of it) guiding men to live the cloistered lives which men lived once, in this very spot, you say."

"They were most of them happy, hard-working fellows, too. There is one good quality they are supposed to have pre-eminently possessed, which I rank highly; though you will laugh me to scorn."

"Do I hold any one good quality in such contempt, my lord?"

"I believe so; indeed, you have proved it to me beyond a doubt. The monks I read of, Miss Bruce, generally possessed that charity which thinketh no evil until there is—evil to think."

The proud yet gentle way he said those few words, looking out wistfully over the wide lands he called his own, gave Hester, for a moment, a rather insignificant, uncomfortable feeling. So small she felt beside him in her unsunny mourning dress, and with her angry face twitching like a baby's. It was hardly for more than a moment. Before he had turned and looked down at her it was gone; and half angrily, half satirically, she answered him, "Why do you not remind me how they pitied and prayed for the evil when they knew it was there? I am as powerless to imitate them in that as in your other insinuation."

"Why should you pity me for what you have never proved me to possess?"

"Pity you?" she echoed, sarcastically. "Why should I pity you? I have no cause to pity you. If I had, I do not care enough for you to pity you."

She had not felt surprised at his quick comprehension of her meaning. She had not turned away her face as she spoke the hot, rapid words. There was no shadow of shame in her passionate eyes, while he, in his calm, still strength beside her, paused a minute before he replied. Then the words came very low.

"What has worked me this evil? What has made you hate me so?"

She laughed oddly, the words following the laugh with sudden passion.

"I do not hate you. I never said I hated you. What are you to me, my lord, that I should hate you?"

His white face—bent to hers—had still the old look of power which she had always feared. "Say what you will in

your anger," he said, "I can bear all that; but tell me no falsehoods, Hessie."

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes were almost pitiful in their hot and trembling eagerness. She felt as if to let them droop were to own herself vanquished.

"I read your heart almost too easily," he said. "My child, my child, I cannot help it. I can read all but that one thing—the cause of your distrust. I sometimes think hardly of people myself, hardly knowing why, and stand aloof when they would come; that is how you feel, perhaps, towards me. Hatred it is, whatever may have been its cause, not indifference. That hatred I may some day understand."

Again the light laugh that had so much mockery in it rang through her lips, and the hands that had been clasped upon the broken stones were raised and parted with a sudden, almost fierce, impatience. "Will you join the company now?"

He offered her his hand, but she drew back mortified at his coolness; his dark eyes flashed angrily for an instant, then a quick smile broke on his lips.

"Insult, was it not, to suppose you would accept assistance from one for whom you do not care enough to pity or to hate? Unpardonable! I was not on my guard. Miss Bruce, do you know that this hatred of yours places you as low as the one you hate? Have you ever thought of that?"

"Let us go down," she answered, hastily. "Why are we staying up here?"

"You cannot go, I fancy, without my help, and that you refused to accept. Hessie"—he hesitated a moment, looking at her with a yearning tenderness—"Hessie, why is it? You, who are so beautiful, should be kind and gentle—if only out of pity."

She had been standing in all the dignity she could assume; but his speech made her shrink back a little, strangely stung. It brought back suddenly her father's words to her on that last night; but presently out of that there grew a remembrance of the other promise she had made him. She trembled visibly as she spoke with low sarcasm.

"And what may you mean by *kind*, my lord?"

"I mean—why do you see me give you all the love of my heart, yet hate me with such contemptuous hatred?"

Something in the proud, sad voice touched Hester with a pain she could not understand.

"Lord Leaholme," she said, gently, "will you be kind to me—a lonely, fatherless girl—and never tell me this again as long as I live?"

"Why are you lonely, save by your own free will?" he asked, very low and gravely.

"I am lonely," she answered, passionately; "and when you speak to me I feel doubly—oh! more than doubly—so."

"And does your own heart not tell you this is wrong? It is real pain to me to see you lonely, Hessie."

The old remembrance had come back then in all its force.

"I would rather be lonely all my life," she said, coldly, "than bring my loneliness to be—to be prevented by you, my lord."

"That is enough, Miss Bruce," he answered, with a ring of agony in the low, clear voice. "Not to save you from such loneliness, not to save myself from a life-long loneliness, will I parade my love again; despise it as you will, but despise it silently, in your own heart. To me you shall never have need to do so again, *through all my life*; for even *you* know me enough to be sure that this love which I have been mad enough to give without a shadow of return is given, and cannot be taken back through all my life. Come, we are no broken-hearted Pyramus and Thisbe for the crowd down there to look upon and pity. Ah, what a terrible idea! You even shudder at that yourself, though I never saw you flinch as you dealt me this death-blow. Come, I boast the privileged character of host to-day—nothing else; and there are my guests, and this cheerful and extensive spot which they admire and criticise is mine. Beautiful it is, is it not? What could a man desire more? No, I feel a very enviable monarch, merely missing—perhaps—the brightest jewel in my crown. Yet, after all, what is a jewel more or less to a man who—never wears them? No Pyramus am I; and you, Miss Bruce?"

"I am one of your guests, my lord," she answered, so humbly that she seemed to be beseeching his consideration.

"Yes, one of my guests," he went on, in the same quick, bitter tone; "one of the lesser ones, too. Very fair to look upon, but a thorough child, with a child's prejudices and a child's temper. Severe, am I? Perhaps so. I have known men who would have destroyed the light and beauty of your life for less than you have said to me to-day; but—there they are, a merry, admiring group. I must needs refresh my eyes

by gazing on them. Such a Triton I am going to be among them, and you—you must needs sail with the stream, poor little minnow! Thank God, you have the easier part to play!"

"Ha! Miss Lane, is that you? Wait, and let me help you up those stairs; they are, like ourselves, deceitful ever! Take care, or you will come to grief as surely as I have done this morning."

"Did you fall, Douglas?"

"Ignominiously. And Miss Bruce never so much as held out a finger to me."

"Oh, she is here, then? Tom has been looking for her everywhere."

"How odd! Why did he overlook her here, then?"

"He has just been asking where she was," went on Bella, eagerly; "but, of course, I could not tell him."

"Of course not; he never could have expected so much from you. Must I ask her where she was, or will it do to tell you where she is?"

Bella laughed as she always did when he puzzled her; and then began to exclaim on the beauty of the water and the trees.

"Now help me down, please, Douglas." He did so; almost overtaking Hester, who had gone on alone; and at the foot of the tower they waited for the others, who were coming to join them.

"Now, Lord Leaholme," cried Bella, "please, we all want to go over your fishing-tower; do let us! Tom never lends us his key, though it always hangs in the study at home most provokingly."

"You never ask for it," said Tom, bluntly. "Any one may take it who likes—if they put it back again."

"Will you care for such an unlively spot?" asked the earl, rather wearily.

"Indeed we should," answered Bella, readily, "should not we, girls? It is the funniest, solitariest place you ever saw."

"Solitary places are not generally very funny," remarked Tom; "but of course it is a matter of taste. Let us in, Leaholme."

"Oh, let us in, that we may find the light," hummed Bella, following with her gayest step.

They passed through the ruins to a tower that stood apart at the other extremity, seemingly in good preservation, standing coldly and haughtily aside, while its companions

crumbled and decayed. They stopped at a low, arched, iron-nailed door, the narrow worn steps half broken away. Leaholme put a key in, and, opening the creaky little door, stood back while they passed in one by one; then bent his tall head low and followed them.

"All we Herefordshire people feel a kind of proprietorship in these ruins," said Tom, "and always bring our less favored friends to see them; but I don't believe you have ever been yet, Hessie. Is not this a queer little place to come upon in the midst of that old falling monastery?"

They were in a small round room, damp and chill even on that sunny morning, lighted by one narrow, grated window, high up in the wall, from which—if you could reach it—you looked straight over the lonely surface of the still white lake. There was a grate in the room, and a few articles of furniture; but it chiefly contained fishing implements and tackle of all kinds.

"This lake is famous for its fishing, and this appropriation of the tower is a contrivance I admire," explained Tom, with an air of thorough at-homeness in the place. "I am proud, I assure you, of being joint possessor of the accommodation."

"How are you so?" asked Marian Berkeley.

"Why, I have one key of the place for myself, and permission to fish here when I care to."

"Our right here we equally feel there is none to dispute. And we catch a great deal," remarked Leaholme, opening another little door, and disclosing a narrow, winding staircase. "Will you go up-stairs?"

"I am sure, Tom, you do not deserve such kindness to you," smiled Bella, preparing to mount first.

"I suppose he would poach if he had not the right given him," said Hester, gravely, "he is so very energetic in his sport."

"Don't you be satirical, Miss Bruce. I have caught a few fine fellows in my day."

"You have had your day, then, Tom?"

"Not quite. I shall catch another some time, and make you eat it, too, little lady, for your impertinence."

"I know Lord Leaholme has caught a hundred to your one, Tom," said Bella, smiling still more.

"Then Tom has dreamed he caught those fine fellows," replied Leaholme, lightly. "The fact is, Miss Lane, I do not

like this place. There is such a lonely, dreary look about it—such a breathless, shut-in feeling in the atmosphere.”

“I never think beautiful places lonely,” said Marian, unable to imagine it otherwise than she saw it, filled with gay young forms and faces.

“Do you not? I think they are. Just as beautiful natures can make you feel inexpressibly lonely by the want of one thing which, after all, could not add to the beauty—in other eyes; and the absence of which cannot mar it.”

“What is the ‘one thing,’ Lord Leaholme?”

“I was just wondering,” he said, with a laugh, “what could be the indescribable want about this place: light and air, everything life-giving it seems to want.”

They went on up the stairs then, Hester lingering on her way, mounting the small dark, stone steps (some of which were broken almost dangerously) unwillingly. The girls began curiously and merrily examining the upper room, circular like the one below, with another narrow window, grated, too, and as high in the wall as the other.

“Grated as closely,” Hester said, with a childish shudder, “as a prison window.”

Leaving the tower at last, they stood a few minutes at the outer door, looking over the wide and lonely water, and into the dark, rich, sombre woods, listening unconsciously for any sound that might disturb the stillness. But none came, and the silence grew so heavy and so oppressive that they turned to look at each other, and speak to each other for relief.

“Well, Hessie, what do you think of it?” asked Tom, noticing that she was still silent.

“Such a lonely spot! I could more easily fancy ‘a drowned maiden’s hair’ here than ‘among the nets on Dee.’ Is this little house haunted, Lord Leaholme?”

“I think not,” he answered, laughing. “There has been no tragedy among the Arundels yet.”

“You add the ‘yet’ as though they were all to come,” said Tom.

“It may be. I see a little cloud across the lake there.”

“As big as a man’s hand, is it?”

“Hardly, I think. Scarcely bigger, indeed, than—yours, Miss Bruce.”

“Hessie, do you think that means a tragedy coming?” laughed Tom.

“I see no objection, if Lord Leaholme is anxious for the

tragedy," she answered, with intense indifference in her face and voice.

"There always is a tragedy in every noble family," said Miss Berkeley. "We have a splendid one. I am sure there is one in yours, Lord Leaholme, only you pretend to forget it."

"If you will allow me, I will lock this door," he said, turning suddenly with his back to them, but not before Hester, watching with knitted brows, had seen the color rush into his face.

"I must go and perform my *devoirs* among the elders, I suppose, Hessie," said Tom, with a rueful face. "Where shall you be when I come back?"

"I shall be sure to be," said Hester, laughing, "but I cannot be sure of the where."

"You wish to—to stroll down there alone, Miss Bruce?" said Leaholme, as Tom left her.

"If you please."

"I will not intrude upon you, nor allow others to do so," he said, quietly, "but in your thoughts deal leniently with—your host."

"When did you ever hear of a minnow's thoughts affecting a Triton?" she asked, gravely, as the girls turned and waited for Leaholme.

"They do sometimes, in very natural history."

"A very unnatural Triton, I think," she answered, with her pretty laugh.

"To set his thoughts upon a minnow? So he is. Here are the boys in search of you, as usual. Where will be your solitude now?"

"Never mind," she said, regretfully.

"No, I do not mind," he replied, very low, his dark eyes saddening; "why should I mind?"

But in another minute he had met the boys, engrossed their ready attention, and led them off, leaving Hester to the solitude she had longed for among the glorious summer woods which came down to the ruins on the opposite side to that which bordered the lake.

"Why did he do that dreadful thing ten years ago?" she cried in her heart. "Why can such sin never be wiped out? Why did he cross my path again? O God! I must not let him make me call Thy justice in question. But why did he cross my path with his strong will and gentle ways? Why does he haunt me in my loneliness, and try to raise the cloud

that lies between us? He will not try this again—never again. He will never again seek and anger me. A prejudiced, bad-tempered child, he called me; but he was wrong there, and he shall see that he was. What am I saying? I, who am to stand so far aloof, to whom he is worse than nothing. This is almost breaking my word—almost letting him creep into my life. I have done with him from to-day, because I cannot speak of his sin: it would be more than I could bear. So I have done with him after to-day. Oh, if I had never come here! I will never think of him any more, even if I have to speak to him—never any more. I need not avoid him, but I *never* need think of him. Oh, I should like to go home if I could! Yet, what difference need he make to me? To-day is the very day to show him how far apart we are; how impossible it is for even his most earnest or most angry words to move me. Oh, if the old life could come back when I did not know him! My own, own father, if we two could be together now!”

She joined the rest of the party in an hour afterward, with just her old childish, unconscious face, but with a little restless nervousness in the sweet, piquant manner, which had never been there before.

“Lord Leaholme,” exclaimed Tom, as they sat at the long dining-table, a goodly array of pleasant, smiling faces in the shadow of the spreading trees, “you are no lover of croquet, I know, but we must challenge you to one game on that splendid ground of yours.”

“Never, as I live!”

Tom turned to Hester with a mock distress.

“Then, how are we to manage it?”

“Which side wants assistance?” asked Leaholme, carelessly.

“Bella’s side wants a third to play Hessie, and Alf, and me. Lydia is going to see the shooting.”

“I will join them,” said the earl, as he cut the grapes before him, “and defeat you with a will.”

“Or be defeated without a will, my lord?” added Hester, without looking up from her plate.

She made up her mind to win, hardly knowing why, and began to play with all the skill and tact she possessed; getting excited in the game, as usual, until she forgot her motive in the fun of the contest. Once she caught herself wondering what he would think of her eagerness over such a trifling

thing, but she shook away the thought impatiently, knowing how little it signified to her what he might think.

Bella looked radiant during that game, and seemed as deeply bent on winning it as Hester was. Proud of the readiness with which Lord Leaholme had joined her side, and accepting it as an acknowledgement of her skill, Bella was determined to do herself justice. It was not destined to be a long game, Hester was thankful to see, for she was not very fond of croquet, and above all things disliked those tedious, lingering games, over which she had sometimes seen bright faces grow suspicious, and heard gay tongues grow loud and sharp. This was a merry, clever game, every one playing well and heartily; bent on destruction of an enemy, always at hand to help and abet a friend.

"It is long since the Wye croquet-ground has been the scene of such antagonism," said Leaholme, coming up leisurely to his blue ball, which lay for the first time near Hester's yellow one.

"We are playing earnestly, are we not, my lord?"

He smiled at her emphasis.

"We are playing very well, all of us; yet, you know, it is *but* play."

"I forget that when my turn comes."

"Show me. It is your turn now."

The blue ball went rolling along the velvety turf with provoking leisureliness to the other extremity of the ground, and Hester came in triumphantly as rover.

"How do you think it looks over there?" she asked, saucily, pushing back her hat a little, while her eyes danced with fun.

He laughed as he watched her.

"Very blue, I think."

"Now, Bella, do your best for your failing side," called out Tom, "and keep up your spirits."

Tom made his own stroke daintily, after Bella, then the blue ball came cleverly rolling up to the desired spot, exiling Tom upon its way.

"I think," said Leaholme (rover, too, now), leaning on his mallet and curiously examining the ball—"I think it has faded a little, Miss Bruce. It does not look quite so blue as it did."

There was a sudden shout. Alf had rescued Tom; had taken both balls in with his own, and the game was theirs.

"Have you defeated us with a will, Lord Leaholme?" asked Hester, as they still stood near each other.

He struck her ball lazily, and ignored the question.

"You do not play croquet so well as chess," he said, composedly. "You are random and not very sure."

"I have been accustomed to play chess since I was a very little girl," she answered, quietly.

"With whom?" he asked, with a long look under the brim of her hat.

"My own father. He was always fond of chess; and even when he was too weak for many other things, he could enjoy that."

The wooing voice had grown sad and tender, and the great eyes darkened with a look of coming tears. Looking at her, and thinking many longing and regretful thoughts, he spoke, half unconsciously:

"Oh, Hester, if I had known you then!"

In an instant the young lips grew tight and rigid, and the words seemed to totter from them.

"You never could—you never dared—have spoken to me—then."

"You all seem very proud of your victory," put in Bella, coming gaily up, dragging her mallet behind her; "but I do not see that there was any particular merit in winning this particular game."

"Just as much so as in any you every try to win," replied Tom. "Now, Leaholme, may I show HESSIE the conservatories?"

He nodded assent, and they all strolled on together.

"Oh, Lord Leaholme, you *must* be fond of flowers!"

Hester spoke involuntarily, and almost breathlessly, as she stood in the high, wide arched door-ways, looking down the brilliant vistas.

"There is only one thing I love better."

She had passed on, too intent on the flowers to heed his words; but Bella stopped.

"Only one thing, Lord Leaholme?"

"Only one."

"Is that the abbey, or its lord, or its future lady?" asked Tom, coolly.

The answer was cooler still:

"Neither."

"Neither? Then I cannot imagine what it is."

"May we guess?" asked Bella, gayly, as Tom turned away and began to make a tiny bouquet. "May we have one guess each? Is it—somebody?"

"Very vague, and very probable. What do you say, Lane?"

"I only know one thing it could be—a beautiful face."

"Less vague—equally probable. Now, Miss Bruce?"

Hester went on among the flowers, touching some of them with a caressing little touch.

"How conscious you look, Hessie!" called Bella; "I know you heard yourself spoken to."

"I do believe," said Leaholme, pretending to whisper, "that she knows."

"What is it, Bella?" asked Hester, the color rising very slowly in her face as she turned to them.

"You are to guess what Lord Leaholme loves even better than his flowers."

"Oh, is that all? I know."

"What is it?"

"Croquet—when he wins."

He laughed a little, she noticed, as she followed Tom, and then he left the conservatories with Bella.

A little time afterward, as Tom and Hester reached a high glass door lower down, they found him near it, in attendance on old Mrs. Paley, who was criticising a marble statue of Daphne which stood just within it, rising pure and white among the rich and wondrous plants.

"It is the only one you have not seen. The Apollo opposite is an old *habitué*, whom you remember. Perhaps you do not care for the fatigue of walking down to see them all again."

Hester again reached them, as he spoke, and Mrs. Paley, thinking they were following, moved back through the open door into the room. Leaholme's eyes were fixed on the little bunch of bright, choice flowers which Tom had gathered, and Hester had placed in her dress.

"Who gave you those?" he asked, abruptly.

"Mr. Lane."

"Why should he give you my flowers?"

"You told me to gather what I chose," began Tom, his fair face flushing.

"But not to give them to whom you choose."

"I did not understand a restriction," he said, astonished.

Leaholme's voice changed suddenly; the stern frown left his face in a moment.

"I beg your pardon, Lane. What could I have meant by speaking so? Of what could I have been madly dreaming? Do not take them out—pray, do not take them out, Miss Bruce. Please to wear the flowers Tom has so carefully selected for you."

But Hester had taken them out, and laid them down just under Daphne's outstretched hand.

"You can gather me some wild flowers as we go home, Tom," she said, carelessly. "I will wear them, and value them as I could never value these."

And when she had said it, she felt that hers had been the rudeness, and was very uncomfortable accordingly.

Leaholme broke the awkward pause, speaking as usual, with no trace of the struggle of a few minutes before.

"They are all looking at the pictures within, Miss Bruce. Will you go, too?"

"Thank you; but I would rather look at the pictures without."

"But, Lane, you will go, of course; there have been a few additions since you were here last."

"Indeed I will, and Hessie too. Don't be so wilful, dear; you, so fond of beautiful things, come and see the most beautiful things in Wye."

She went with them, a strange tired look upon her face, which was not noticed by the little crowd that clustered among the majestic marble pillars and statues in the hall. With a slow unwillingness in her step, Hester moved through the magnificent place; but gradually the indifference and want of interest all went. She lingered before the paintings and statues, and among the plants, with an intense delight; entranced, in spite of herself; forgetting the very existence of the others; forgetting entirely whose house this was; dreaming only over the beauties which surrounded her. What a place it seemed to her!—quite different from any she had ever seen before. New, bright, beautiful things were mixed with others odd and old, and grand! yet mixed so artistically that they gave to each other a quick character which fascinated her.

"An amalgamation of the different tastes of half a dozen earls," Tom had said once to her in describing Wye; and the words came back to her mind now to be quickly contradicted.

She stood, as she thought of this, before a statue of Endymion just awaking, and unconsciously she recalled Lord Leatholme's words about him one sunny evening on the rocks at Aberswys. What would the story have been, he wondered, if Endymion had not awakened at Diana's kiss, or had risen angrily and blamed her for awaking him. It could not have been, Bella had said; but he had laughed at that idea. The love that gives itself unasked and unsought, must take its chance, he had told her. But where would have been the beauty of the story then?

Hester recalled the words easily, with a new light upon them now. "But the poem, at any rate, is false," she whispered to herself, "and he must feel it; for could there be one heart in all the world that could respond to him in his high hopes and aims; yet that could respond, too, to the unacknowledged sin of the base, incomprehensible heart which can hide so much so cleverly?"

As she turned from the wonderful marble figure, she noticed, just behind it, peering out from among the rare tropical plants, a sleek tiger in the act of springing. She drew back hastily, then advanced again laughing softly to herself.

"The idea of my having started from a stuffed animal! But really his bright eyes do look rather ferocious."

She had strayed from the rest of the party, and, feeling herself alone, sauntered on up the broad stairs, comparing and criticising the old portraits which lined the walls from floor to ceiling.

"Oh! here you are, are you?" exclaimed Tom, coming up behind her, his footfall on the velvet carpet having made no sound to disturb her. "Come along, dear; the other people are all in the billiard room. There are lots of new pictures there, brighter and more interesting than these prim old aristocrats."

"Tom," she said, rather shyly, as they walked on, "were there no Arundels of later times? Where are the newer portraits?"

"A slight few there are, dear; but you would not consider them so interesting, I suppose. The thing to boast of is one's early ancestry: not the prosaic nineteenth century. I wonder who has Abraham's portrait as founder of the family. But I will show you some of the tenderest brancher if you like. Whom do you particularly want to see?"

"The present earl's mother, please."

"That is close to where all our people are; so I shall just quietly show it you, and you need not take any notice, because Leaholme never speaks to us of her. She died when he was born, and she was only eighteen then."

They entered a long, wide room, where two or three little groups stood about, looking at the pictures and talking idly. Hester lingered, reading the names under the paintings—paintings of later date and more modern appearance.

"This is it," whispered Tom, softly, pointing to one picture. It was the portrait of a young girl, evidently taken just as she chose to sit for it, and evidently she sat for it much against her will. A beautiful girl, with a bright, tender, mischievous face, and short, fair curls lying on her forehead.

"Oh!"

There was much in the simple word as Hester spoke it; admiration for the picture; sorrow for him; and—beyond that—a sorrow for the mother, too.

"Come," whispered Tom, seeing Leaholme approaching them. And she passed on, as if she had never halted there.

"If you have been studying the family portraits all this time, Miss Bruce," the earl said, "you must be weary of the very name."

"Not at all," replied Hester, lightly. "I have hardly seen half of them yet."

"I have plenty of companions, have I not, in my solitary quarters? Good old companions who never leave me; friends in stone and canvas. I ought never to be lonely, ought I?"

"You have others, too, neither of stone nor canvas, though as faithful, I dare say. Do you know that tiger made me start as if I had met him in the jungle?"

"As I did on that lucky day when he nearly treated me to the death he was giving—I mean, to the death which I gave him instead."

"Did you kill him simply in sport?" asked Miss Berkeley.

"In sport, yes. But in earnest, too."

"Oh, you surely know the tale of the regiment, Marian, don't you?" inquired Tom; "how that just as that knowing old animal was about to refresh himself by breakfasting on a chop from the best end of the neck of Sir Randal Platt, Leaholme—if I tell the rest I must give Brandt's version of the affair, so I retire; merely adding that Leaholme persuaded the epicure that the noble baronet was indigestible, and induced him to relax the hold his vicious jaws had taken."

"That's all," added Tom, flushing a little; "for I would not like Leaholme to knock me down in his own house."

"What did you do, Lord Leaholme?" asked Bella, immediately, as if she had never thought of it before.

"I merely happened to see the villain——"

"Platt, or the tiger?" inquired Mr. Bruce.

"I meant the compliment for the tiger; but, after all, he was no villain, but a very beautiful creature, and a very skillful one; having no idea, of course, of the pain he inflicted. Besides," added the earl, with an odd little laugh, "he was but following his instinct, as I follow mine when I can; and it led him to grief, poor fellow, as mine sometimes leads me."

Hester pondered this story a little more than she would have cared to acknowledge, and not long afterward it rushed back upon her memory with a sharp, sore pain.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"WI' ANGUISH."

THE time had passed so quickly to Hester, that she felt quite sorry to hear the great gong which summoned the scattered party to the long, bright room where tea was prepared: and into which the scented summer air came wooingly through the row of open windows.

Another gay and merry meal it was, for, as a host, the Earl of Leaholme won even bitter little Hester's unhesitating praise; his own high-bred grace and courtesy setting every one at ease in his house.

"It is an abominable shame, Leaholme," said Mr. Bruce, lounging at one of the windows when they rose, and keeping up the gay and bantering spirit of the meal, "that you should not marry, but keep all this unlimited space for a solitary bachelor."

"How can I marry without any wife?" quoted Leaholme, joining him.

"You will be so wofully hard to please, I fancy," said Mrs. Bruce.

"Not at all," he answered, laughing. "I have been pleased already."

"Tell us about it, do," she asked, insinuatingly.

"Impossible," he replied, in a quick, comical tone, "for the history of my wooing, Mrs. Bruce, has not a title-page."

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Tom.

"Very little, my dear fellow. The motto below the name was one of Shakespeare's blunders. 'Beauty lives with kindness,' and I can do nothing until I find it again."

"Lord Leaholme," said Marian, after a little whispered conference with the other girls, "will you put the finishing touch to our pleasure of to-day?"

"Would it be touch of mine, Miss Berkeley?"

"Several touches of yours," replied Bella, playfully; "you can guess what we mean, I'm sure."

He turned his back to the window, coloring a little.

"Yes. I can guess what you mean; but I really never play that stiff old organ, Miss Lane, except——"

"Of course, you mean except when so many people ask you. You cannot resist us all, Lord Leaholme?"

"I should find it equally difficult to let you all go away with an unfavorable impression of my organ, and an unfavorable impression of myself."

"How should you do that?"

"By showing both out of tune."

They laughed incredulously.

"Do play, Lord Leaholme!" pleaded Mrs. Bruce.

"Come into the hall," cried Bella, in a loud whisper; "that will get him to the organ."

So they all trooped out and clustered round the instrument. Hester followed them into the hall, but lingered at the open door, looking out across the broad, bright, sunny park, to where the deer with raised heads stood listening among the trees.

Presently Tom came up to her, shrugging his shoulders.

"The united feminine influence is powerless," he said, in a low, amused tone; "he refuses to pipe, though they offer to dance."

"I wonder they ask him," she answered, with utter unconcern.

"Do you not care to hear him, then?"

"I should, if he played at once, as—as he did in Aberswys church."

"Why on earth should he refuse to-day?" ruminated Tom, "for I know he is fonder of playing than anything. He plays here alone for hours together, I know. But he certainly is, as he says, out of tune to-day. Do you remark it?"

"I never remark discords when I can help it."

"Do you wish him to play?"

"I should like to hear the organ. I wish I could play it myself."

"I think the piano is quite enough for you, little lady, considering how beautifully you play it. But I wish Leaholme would do as they ask him, if only to show you. Do you see Brandt hovering about ready to blow, and the most eager of all to hear? I will go and try once more."

But that journey, judging by the silence which followed, was bootless, too.

"Hessie," whispered Wattie, coming up to her in his gentle, clinging way, "ask Lord Leaholme to play. He won't for me."

She put her hand softly on the bright little head. "If he won't for you, dear, how can I ask him?"

"Try," he pleaded.

"No; do not ask me," she cried, hastily, as Wattie pulled her toward Leaholme.

"Do not ask her, Wattie," he said, coolly. "Whatever it may be about, do not ask her."

"I want her to ask you to play," exclaimed the child, simply.

"And will she?"

"You will play if she does, won't you?"

"She must not know her answer beforehand, else what would be the use of asking?"

"Now, Hessie," whispered Wattie, "ask now."

"Will you play to us, Lord Leaholme? Please to play one thing to us?" asked Hester, failing sadly in her effort to look anxious over the request.

He turned away with an odd smile—half pleased, half sad—and sat down at the instrument, while Hester moved back to her old position at the door, and the others clustered round the organ-stool. In the soft, still summer air there gathered strange, beautiful, dreamy fancies round Hester, as the sweet, subdued tones crept into her heart, and stirred its longings and its hopes—widening, raising, purifying them.

Deeper and grander the tones grew, surging and swelling round her now in wild unrest. Her big, dark eyes were wide and troubled; with a far-off, yearning look that grew more and more pitiful, while the passion of her heart spoke in the gentle, mighty voice.

Suddenly she clasped her little hot hands before them; the grand, echoing strain was mounting higher than her bewildered, troubled thoughts could go, even with such wings to mount on.

At last the notes grew slow and soft again; and, following the passionate harmonies, there stole upon her ear the beautiful and plaintive melody of Schubert's "Addio"—stole softly to her very heart, too, through the rich and full disguise in which the player sent it forth.

She was the only one who recognized it; and in its pleading, unwonted sadness, it told poor little Hester the one yet acknowledged secret of her life.

Busy tongues had superseded the voice of the grand old instrument, when Hester slowly rose.

"How beautiful it was! how beautiful!" whispered Tom.

"What was it, Hessie?"

"Why do you always think I know, Tom?" she answered, tiredly.

"I think you know, dear."

"I did recognize one fugue, and a saraband. Oh, Tom, I think Bach's music must be like the trumpets of Heaven."

"But what was the last thing?"

"Just that," she answered, with a queer little laugh, "the last thing. I mean," she added, repentantly, "a German air, Tom."

The carriages drove up now, and the whole party assembled round the door. Lord Leaholme's handsome tax-cart, with its pair of beautiful bays, was among them, and, feasting her eyes on the dazzling silver of the harness, Bella exclaimed gladly. The Churleigh britzka—the old-fashioned carriage which Mrs. Bruce did not favor—was first, and she and her mother took their seats.

"How are you going, Hessie?" asked Alfy, coming straight up to her through the group.

"What do you recommend?" she inquired, not knowing how to answer him.

"Hessie, I am sure you will like a seat with mamma," said Bella, at that moment; "come."

As Hester, with Alfy still on her arm, followed, not caring in the slightest where or with whom she sat, Leaholme intercepted her.

"Where are you going?"

"To mamma," answered Bella, readily. "Why did you come away from grandma in such a hurry? I want you to assist Hessie into the britzska, too. Of course, I must drive back with some one else."

"Why?"

"You would like a change of companions, I am sure, Lord Leaholme."

"That is peculiarly a lady's privilege; I will not encroach upon it."

"Do you mean to say you never change, then?"

"Never."

"But you would be tired of driving me forever?"

"It depends entirely on what I drove you to. Miss Bruce, why are you smiling?"

"You did not see me smile, my lord."

"Not quite; but you were smiling, nevertheless. How are you going home? Walking with Alf by moonlight?"

"Could you not inquire a little less abruptly?"

"I could not have done so without giving time for a plan to be arranged before you answered."

"Why not?"

"Because—there, because I foresaw that."

That—so far as she could tell—was Tom, whip in hand, speaking to Bella on the steps. She looked up into the earl's face, puzzled.

"Do you not feel your fate changed?" he asked, laughing a little; "she will not circumvent you there."

Hester's face was burning when Tom came up to her.

"I am going to drive you, I am glad to say, dear. Alf, run off to mamma. Have you any wraps, Hessie?"

"No. I walked here, you know. I do not need any."

Leaholme looked down quizzically on the thin mourning-dress.

"Stay, Miss Bruce; this hopeful old prison can surely manage a trifle in that way."

He turned and ran up the broad, low stairs, taking six or seven at a time; and Hester stood back and waited until he came up to her with a long, soft fur cloak in his hand.

"Did you mean that for me? Really I do not need it."

"Turn round, please."

Hester obeyed, like the very child that she often felt beside him, and he folded it round her tenderly and effectually.

"Thank you."

"Is that snug?"

"I am very snug indeed. Thank you, it is all right now."

But before he let it go he looked into her face with a searching question in his dark, grave eyes.

"This day is gone forever now. You are not sorry?"

"No; glad."

"Why is your face so full of defiance even now, Hessie?"

"Tom is waiting," she answered, impatiently. "Let me go!"

He dropped his hands instantly. "I have let you go, Hester. It may come some day—too late, perhaps—God help us! But now—I have let you go."

Half bewildered by his whispered words and the painful earnestness upon his face, her eyes grew dim and her lips quivered.

While she struggled to hide it from him, he turned away and spoke aloud and coolly:

"Now, who is going to drive this polar bear? Oh! you, Lane? That is just as it should be; and you can gather your wild flowers as arranged, like a modern edition of 'The Babes in the Wood.'"

Then he passed on to his own horses, and Tom and Hester drove off slowly down the darkening avenue.

"Here we are alone, without incumbrances, and all the drive before us," began Tom, gayly; "we will not hurry."

"How beautiful it is!" cried Hester, with a long-drawn breath.

"Yes, it is a 'lovely spot,' as the tramp said of Dickens' garden; yet I never heard you praise it once to-day."

"You heard a great many praises, though."

"So I did; and felt them all."

"I felt them, too."

"But did not care to say so? Well, perhaps Leaholme understood, for he seemed to like showing you things, spite of the antagonism between you."

She did not try to answer this unanswerable remark, and Tom went on: "Was he not a lucky fellow to come into all this so easily?"

"Yes," she answered, absently.

"Very; and he looks exactly as if he and his forefathers had been born upon the place for hundreds of years, does not he?"

"I don't know what difference it makes in the look of a man where his forefathers were born."

"Oh yes, you do, dear. There is something comes down to them with the title."

"But this earl's forefathers *were* born on the estate, of course, else it would not be his now."

"Not his fathers in a direct line. He did not succeed in the natural course of events."

"I know," she assented, bitterly.

"Yet how naturally he seems to belong to the beauty and grandeur around him, as the beauty and grandeur belong to him. And yet, do you know, Hester, he looked just as thoroughly at home, and was just as courteous the other day when I found him in Ezra Moore's cottage, leaning on his gun to bring himself on a level with Mrs. Ezra, in that horrid little kitchen, and pretending to admire that blessed baby of hers."

"Of course he was really admiring it, if it is blessed," said Hester, promptly, "and Ezra's is not a horrid little kitchen, Tom."

"Isn't it, dear? I thought it so, and yet, as I told you, Leaholme did not look a bit out of place there, and was just as courteous as he has been here to-day. I wonder did he learn that sort of thing abroad."

Hester laughed—a low, sarcastic laugh.

"*That* is not what he learned abroad, Tom."

"It was born with him, I suppose; but he has been a great deal abroad, you know. At least, I have no idea what you do know, dear; you do so hate to hear anything about him."

There came a sudden fancy over Hester that she would like to hear something now, as they two drove alone together. But could she ask, she wondered, without any angry tremble in her voice.

"Was he poor, Tom, before he came to the estate?"

"I fancy not. He was a soldier, you know."

"Yes, I know," she said, already impatient of the subject, now it came before her.

"Yes, there is a good deal of the soldier about him still."

"He was—was he—what you call wild, when he was young?"

"I should imagine not. I never heard of it. There was but little idling time for the army when he served." A vision of the idleness of one German town, and the sin that had been

committed there, blinded her eyes; but Tom went on without waiting for an answer. "Let me see. It is—how long is it since he became Earl of Leaholme?"

"Three years," she said, involuntarily, but in a strained, unnatural voice.

"Yes, just about. The last peer had but a short reign, and that only nominal."

"How was that?" she asked, relieved to drop the subject she had started.

"When the old earl died, leaving no direct heir, the title went to a nephew of his, who was yachting in the Mediterranean at the time; and when the news reached him, he was in such a hurry to take possession, that, in defiance of all advice, he landed at the first town he reached—some horrid little place where the cholera was raging. He took it, of course, and died before he had felt what it was like to be called 'your lordship.'"

Feeling strangely weak and giddy, Hester turned her white face up to Tom.

"Who was he?"

"Captain Douglas Arundel, of the Forty-first, or what we call the Welsh regiment. One of the greatest scoundrels, I have heard, who ever, by the help of Providence, escaped a title. Hessie—oh, Hessie! what is the matter?"

She was standing upright in the carriage, looking behind along the silent, empty road, with a strained, wild, eager gaze. Tom dropped the reins and took her hands to draw her down to her seat, but she shook him off.

"Sit down, love," he said, gently. "The ponies will be off."

Her poor, wandering senses seemed to come back to her slowly; but before Tom had the reins in his hand again, the horses were off. For what seemed to him an age, he lost all command over them; but Hester enjoyed it keenly. To her burning, bitter, reproachful thoughts—so miserable, so glad—that rapid driving against the evening wind, the fear and the excitement were most welcome. When Tom could hold the ponies in at last, and turned to her with a deep sigh of relief, she gave a little low, happy laugh.

"Tom, who used this Earl of Leaholme to be?"

"Captain Douglas Arundel, of the Grenadier Guards, cousin to the other fellow, and rather a contrast. Hessie, I believe

you must have felt the danger coming, when you turned so white."

"A danger past or future then. No present one, dear Tom."

"Thank you for calling me so," he said, with his happy, boyish smile. "You do not know how I love to hear you say it. Have you forgiven me for frightening you?"

"You do not frighten me, nor did the ponies."

"You are so fearless—so unlike other girls."

"That would be a wider compliment if you said it to the other girls, Tom."

"I do not happen to think so, dear. I mean it as you do not; and it only makes me feel it all the harder to make you care for me."

"I do care for you, Tom."

"Better than you did at first?"

"Much better."

"And now you may grow fonder of me still?"

"Of course I shall, my greedy cousin."

He turned away with a little proud flush, and said no more until they reached home.

They all loitered on the terrace until the Wye carriage drove up, rolling along smoothly and sleepily in the moonlight. Bella, leaning back on the luxurious cushions, her tartan shawl wrapped round her, looked very comfortable and very happy.

"As why should she not?" thought poor little Hester, "for she has done nothing to make her hateful to herself and him."

Tom moved forward to his sister, but she only laughed down at him, and waited for Lord Leaholme to dismount and come down to her. Mrs. Bruce, who was near Hester on the terrace, smiled, proud and satisfied, when she saw how tenderly he seemed to lift her in his strong arms. He followed Bella up the steps slowly, and, leaning against the stone balustrade, spoke to Mrs. Bruce.

"What is to come next, Mrs. Bruce? At your bidding, are we to discourse; or, like fairies, trip upon the green?"

"Doesn't it look inviting in the moonlight?" put in Bella, eagerly.

"If you would like a dance," replied her mother, glancing at the earl with a pleased smile, "pray arrange it."

"Nonsense!" laughed Mr. Bruce, joining them; "the partners could not see each other's faces. Besides, James is

trying to tell us supper waits. Come, Isabel. Oh, by the way, Leaholme, did you find your ring?"

"No; I have not yet," said the earl, while Hester glanced with such quick, strange eagerness into his face. "I think I shall let it go this time."

"I am afraid your finger must be thinner, Lord Leaholme," cried Bella, innocently: "you never used to drop it."

"The Arundel for whom it was made must have been a regular Falstaff," laughed Leaholme, carelessly. "My intercourse with that ring has been nothing but a succession of losses and discoveries ever since my promotion. When I last lost it, Miss Bruce told me she was not at all surprised that I could not wear it. Immediately after her unfeeling words, I found it. Perhaps, if you mention your surprise once more, Miss Hessie, I may meet with similar success."

Never guessing that he spoke to her only that he might win a word on this last night from the sweet voice he so dearly loved, Hester's cheeks flamed in the moonlight with bitter, stinging self-reproach.

"Even if I thought it would succeed," she said, in a voice whose pain not one of them could guess at, "I could not say that again."

"Then I must trust to chance," replied Leaholme, lightly, "and Brandt's good eyes. I am only sorry that I happened to lose it to-day."

"Bella, bring every one into supper *sans ceremonie*," said her mother, taking her husband's arm.

Tom knew his part well in that vital element of his mother's house—Society; and gave his arm to Lydia. Leaholme bent, gravely offering his to Bella; and Hester, with the tears starting in her eyes, staid behind a moment alone (for the children had been sent to bed immediately on their return). Only a few hours before she would have rejoiced at being left so; now she raised a wan little face in the moonlight with a longing that was intense as prayer. When she followed and took her seat at the unusual meal her head throbbed with a pain she had never felt before in all her life.

As they all assembled in the drawing-room, Tom asked, rather listlessly, if some one would play the "Moonlight Sonata."

"As being so appropriate," smiled Bella, "I will."

It was well poor Beethoven was out of hearing as she did

so, or he would have felt his sweet, impassioned moonlight turned to glaring, flickering gas.

"Why did not you play it, Hessie?" Tom asked, in a whisper; "of course that was what I wanted."

"I did not know," she answered, dreamily.

Bella gave her place to Miss Berkeley, who performed a brilliant tarentelle in a brilliant style. And then Bella and Lydia sung "The Cousins" in a highly scholastic manner, and won just the applause it had been accustomed to win on every occasion of its performance during the previous three or four years.

"Now, Lord Leaholme," said Mrs. Bruce, at a sign from Bella, "it is your turn."

"Are the turns compulsory, Mrs. Bruce?" he asked.

"Of course, with those whom we like to hear."

"I am ready," he said, going to the piano, "if you are not weary of my performance for to-day."

"May I accompany you?" entreated Bella.

"Thank you."

There was a sad, tired look upon his face, which struck Hester instantly, and made her understand how it was easier to him to sing than to parry their questioning; a look that was new and strange in the brave, dauntless eyes.

Bella opened "Don Giovanni" at "Il mio Tesoro," and began to play; but he was not ready.

"Now, Lord Leaholme," she said, smiling up at him as she struck a single key. "This is your note."

"Oh, Lord Leaholme," laughed Marian, "fancy your requiring the note given you!"

"Contemptible, is it not?" he asked with a quick laugh. "I think you must strike the single notes all through, Miss Lane."

Bella, laughing heartily, played the symphony again, and then the voice came in, rich and clear. But before the end, it faltered again, and the last word and note were lost in another odd laugh.

"I will not try again after that failure."

"Oh yes, you will!" cried Bella, gayly. "We cannot excuse him, can we, Marian? Why, that was beautiful!"

"Certainly, we cannot excuse him; and please play for yourself, Lord Leaholme."

Bella resigned her seat, but lingered near.

"Will a nursery rhyme do?" he said, striking a few chords

lazily and tamely; while Hester wondered could those listless fingers be the same that had made the grand old organ utter such wonderful things only a few hours before. With sudden nervous power he began to sing:

“Bonny wee thing, canny wee thing,
Bonny wee thing, wert thou mine,
I wad wear thee in my bosom,
Lest my jewel I should tine.

Wishfully I look and languish,
In that bonny face o' thine;
And my heart it sounds wi' anguish,
Lest my wee thing be na mine.

Wit, and grace, and love, and beauty,
In ae constellation shine;
To adore thee is my duty,
Goodness o' this soul o' mine!”

“Hessie,” whispered Tom, “you must play now.”

It was almost mechanically that she rose and went with him to the piano; for the clear, quick words she had been listening to rang in her heart above the gay voices round her.

“And my heart it sounds wi' anguish,
Lest my wee thing be na mine.”

“Will you sing or play?” Tom asked; but for all answer she nodded to him silently that she wanted no music.

She played what she knew that some one in the room behind her loved; and as she did so, it seemed to her that he only was there; he only, close beside her, speaking as he had spoken in that buried past which was only a few hours old. And now she might tell him! Ah! his own words came between: “Now I have let you go.” They rang again and again to the notes she played; now wildly and passionately, now with a low, despairing cadence. They were so hopelessly, hopelessly true.

“Never again to save you from loneliness; not to save myself from a life-long loneliness, will I parade my love again.” The vow seemed to echo once more among the ruins of the solemn, lonely place where it had been made. And it would never have been spoken if she had not been blind and stubborn. Never again would loving, pleading words be breathed to her by that one voice which could stir her heart to its depths: never again, for he had said so.

“Now I have let you go.”

Hester's fingers lingered on the keys, while her eyes grew dim and her lips trembled. She must go on, she felt; she

dared not turn and show her misery to all the room. Her listeners had been so silent, and her thoughts were so far from them, that she started when a voice behind her suddenly reminded her that Tom was still there. Very cold and clear the words fell upon her hot, painful thoughts.

"Good-night, Lane. I am going off so early in the morning that I think I will not steal any more hours from to-night."

"I will not persuade you," came Tom's answer, "for you looked regularly knocked up, my lord. How long shall you be away this time?"

"I must be away some time before I can judge."

Hester played softly while he spoke, but did play as women sometimes will when their hearts are breaking. She kept her face turned from him and her cold hands busy, while she could have cried aloud for his forgiveness, even in the presence of them all.

"Come home again as soon as you can," broke in Tom's pleasant voice. "Hessie, Lord Leaholme is waiting to say good-night to you."

"Good-bye, my lord."

She turned a little as she held up her hand, but he noticed that she neither rose nor looked at him.

"Good-bye, Miss Hessie. There will be no other picnic among the many ruins at Wye Abbey for a long time. You said you were glad it was over, but I hope you will never regret having come to me kindly—just for this one day."

He held her hand while he spoke, but moved away immediately after, that she might not feel obliged to answer.

Hester's playing was over, and she crept from the room.

The earl had been escorted to the door by all the party except herself and Mrs. Paley, and, as he drove away, he fancied he caught sight of one dim figure standing in the heavy shade watching him. He waved a farewell to the group at the door, with a bitter laugh at himself.

"As if *she* would be likely to be watching me!"

But still he raised his hat again, slowly, in the moonlight; and Hester felt that he had seen her.

She groped her way up-stairs in miserable restlessness, and doubled herself up on the wide seat of her bedroom window; looking out across the quiet, moonlit land, but seeing nothing.

"I seem to have killed my own heart in my sin," she cried, to herself, pressing her hot cheek against the glass, "yet that

is easier to bear than the thought of his pain—who did not sin. I must tell him. I must! I must! He will never care for me again, of course, but he will not despise me quite as he must do now. He will forgive me, perhaps, for he is not hard and unforgiving as I am. He will forgive me, though he will never care for me again. Oh, if I could have told him to-night!” she went on, in her agony, “but I could not, and now perhaps it is too late. What does he think of me? How can he understand my conduct to him—my wicked, proud, repellent manner to him from the very first—while he has tried to cheer my loneliness, and brighten and warm the cold, unloving atmosphere to which I came in my strangeness.”

Ah! what could he think of her? The thought seemed burned into the darkness. He whom she had always treated with contemptuous, childish rudeness, and judged with mean and selfish judgment. “A prejudiced, bad-tempered child” truly she had been; and how much more he might have said than that! He had been only tender and indulgent in his strong and upright manliness—he of whom she had never heard an evil word. She had come a stranger into his path, a little, selfish, narrow-minded stranger, and had set herself to vex and anger him; had tried, so far as her small power went, to cloud and harass his life; and, worst of all, to take His place, who has said, “I will repay.”

Might she not have known he could never have done that thing? Was she so strong in her blindness that she had never doubted her own judgment? Never. And it was too late, now that the light had fallen upon it, and shown it to her in its grotesque and hideous proportions.

What could he think of her? Would he ever know? Would God ever let it be made clear? No. How could she hope for such a blessing after such grievous sin?

Through the few hours of darkness, Hester sat motionless in her bitter sorrow; and when she lay down at last, trying to fancy that the new-born day had brought a new-born hope, she could only toss and turn upon her pillows, until the broad, bright sunlight filled the room.

Then, praying that another sweeter sunlight might fill her heart, and purify it from this heavy cloud, she rose to meet the daily life that would not bring him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WAITING.

MORE than ever, as the summer glided into autumn, did Hester find it hard to prevent her life growing solitary. More than ever did she cling to her little cousins, as Bella and her mother seemed forever growing farther from her in their whirl of gayety and change.

Bella appeared to exist for nothing else, and certainly managed to obtain a satisfactory existence upon it. Poor Hester's heart was too sore yet to care for these ever-recurring excitements, but she tried to take an interest in, and to sympathize with, all Bella's longings and attainings. One party followed another, so that they trod upon each other's heels, as our woes are supposed to do. Parties of every kind—one kind, after all, Hester thought, only nominally legion. Croquet, archery, dinner, dancing, tea—every excuse was made for giving a party, and every excuse was taken in good part because it meant a party. And Hester found her sorrow and loneliness all the harder to bear or forget, on the outskirts of this round of gayety, which, viewed only from the outskirts, seemed but unsubstantial and unsatisfying; but which, perhaps, the girl thought, afraid of being hard in her judgment of Bella, she might enjoy, perhaps, even more than Bella did, if she were obliged to be in it.

Hester thought this thought one sunny October morning, while Bella skipped about the room happier and more exultant in her anticipations even than usual, for this was the day of the yeomanry review; and to-night the regiment (of which the Earl of Leaholme was colonel) gave its annual ball.

"Oh! don't you wish you were going, Hessie?" she cried, as she gave a last look at the new dress to which Horton, her mother's maid, was putting the indispensable finishing touches.

"Not at all, Bella, indeed; but I know I shall enjoy the review very much. Come; the carriage is at the door, and the dress wants nothing more."

"You do not seem cut out for this sort of thing, as I am," said Bella, complacently; "but I dare say you would dance and enjoy it if you went."

"I dare say," answered Hester, quietly. "I sometimes enjoy things too much, I am afraid."

The new Churleigh barouche was one of the most elegant equipages on the field, and contained one of the chief attractions; but the two girls were equally ignorant of what it was, and would have been equally surprised had they been told. With what different reason need not be written.

Hervey, who knew his mistress as thoroughly as he knew his own importance, drew up among the most select and aristocratic of the carriages, drew his grays up with a skill and dexterity which won them many an admiring glance, and pleased him, being a coachman, far more than if the admiring glances had been directed toward himself.

Mrs. Bruce smiled and bowed around her graciously, while Bella looked up and down, and nodded her head and her dot of a white bonnet in answer to the salutation from other carriages, and laughed her greetings to the various equestrians who halted at the doors of the barouche. Still, as she lolled in the corner, the light, restless eyes searched beyond all these, and the tiny white parasol came bobbing down into Hester's face every now and then, as she moved it to follow a scarlet-clad figure riding beside the reviewing officer, sitting easily the splendid horse, which danced and curveted over the grass, as if he felt the stirring military music to be performed especially for his benefit.

The parasol fell gracefully back on Bella's shoulder, and she held out a spotless, well-fitting primrose glove when the colonel, smiling into the carriage, tried to keep his horse still and quiet a minute at the door.

"How are we acquitting ourselves, Mrs. Bruce?" he asked, looking at neither of the girls now, but over the sunny fields to the glittering harness and dazzling scarlet of the troops.

"We," indeed," laughed Mrs. Bruce. "You would not like any one else to class you with those toy soldiers."

The gentlemen standing there laughed, and so did Bella, merrily.

"No, indeed," she said; "this must seem child's play to you, after your real battles."

He smiled at Bella's speech, but answered Mrs. Bruce.

"Ashamed of being classed with them, you say? Why, they are in their ranks over there like men, Mrs. Bruce, waiting for their orders, ready and obedient. I am loitering here, leaving my work half done. Theirs would be the shame, I

should fancy, to be classed with a wandering toy soldier like myself. What do you think, Miss Bruce?"

"You mean, of course, that your attention and thoughts are wandering," she said, simply. "Perhaps theirs are too. We cannot tell so long as we watch only—at a distance, too."

"More than your thoughts wander," said Tom, laughing at him, as his horse backed impatiently. "M'Gregor follows their example."

"There comes our noble reviewer within hail again. He is as terrible to me, Lane, as his Saturday namesake is to a maiden author," said Leaholme, in quick reply.

A gay laughter followed his grave assertion, while he cantered across the field, and rode round again beside the old hussar who personated the *Saturday Review*.

"And that is the officer who came down to review the regiment, is it?" asked Mrs. Bruce, as her husband rode up to the carriage. "Why, Lord Leaholme looks by far the more thorough soldier."

"So he may be, my dear; but that work is all over for him, except this little show now and then. Listen how differently his voice rings to those of the other fellows: some capital officers, too, there are among them, and a few soldierly fellows in each troop—considering, I mean, what trifle training it is. Hessie, you look as if you wished yourself among them."

"So I do, Uncle Alf. I do so wish I had ridden with you!"

"But then you could not have worn that odd little thing on the top of your head. Is it supposed to be a bonnet?"

"The supposition is open to debate, uncle; but it is so stiff to sit here all the time. May I walk a little, aunt?"

Mrs. Bruce laughed, amused and satirical.

"Are you so anxious to be kicked by the horses?"

"Let her go, Isabel. Tom will take care of her."

Tom, who hovered about the carriage, though he had left his seat, was ready and eager to take charge of her, and Mrs. Bruce, after a glance at her husband's assenting face, told her she might go.

The occupants of the luxurious cushioned seats smiled a little pityingly as they watched the two walk off together in the flaring sunshine; amused, though, by the happy excitement of the child-face which looked so eagerly away over the field to where the regiment galloped in perfect order against

a glorious background of dark autumn woods and hills, then up into Tom's face for sympathy; but which never glanced at the gay company behind.

"Tom," she cried, as the troop dashed past to the ringing clash of their sword sheaths and the stirring military music, "does it not remind you of Balaklava?"

"Well, not exactly, dear," he answered, smiling, "because you see I was not there. Does it remind you?"

"It reminds me of the picture that has always been in my mind," said Hester, laughing at herself; "but it is not quite like it."

"Not quite, I think, indeed. Hessie, just look round and bow to some of these people, will you?"

Hester, meeting a pleasant face she knew, returned the greeting in her sweet, glad way; then forgot to look further among the crowd, and turned to the field again.

"They are going to shoot now, dear. Shall you be frightened?"

"You will see."

And certainly there was not much fear on her face as she stood watching and listening.

"Were you at Waterloo just then, Miss Bruce?"

Lord Leaholme had dismounted close to them; and, with his horse's bridle over his arm, his bronzed face very grand and soldierly, Hester thought, under the gleaming helmet, stood beside her, looking curiously down into the dreamy splendor of her eyes.

"No," she answered, simply; "I was just coming back from Balaklava."

"With the remnant of the Light Brigade?"

"Yes; poor, noble fellows!"

"Just thorough soldiers, that's all," said Tom, drawing back as the earl's groom brought up another horse to take M'Gregor's place.

"Thorough soldiers and noble fellows, too, Lane," he answered, taking the bridle from his arm; "and there are many over there who, though they do not show off very brilliantly to-day, would have done the same thing, unhesitatingly and unquestioningly."

"I rather doubt that," said Tom, with a shake of the head.

"What do you say, Hessie?"

"I'm afraid I like to think of it as a brave, brilliant thing which very few would have done."

"And I," added Leaholme, drawing on his glove, while his sword lay on Hester's dress, "like to think of it as a brave, brilliant thing which any man would have done."

"They were obliged to do it, after all," said Tom, "and perhaps in their hearts they rebelled against it. One of your blessings now, Leaholme, is that you need not follow anywhere. What a much pleasanter fate it is to have to say 'Go,' and folks go, than to have to go where you are told!"

"Yes," he said, slowly, laying his white glove on the neck of the beautiful black mare, and bringing her a little nearer to Hester; "I find it easy to say 'Go,' and folks go; but when I say 'Come,' I find it a different matter altogether."

Hester looked up at him with a sudden, questioning look.

"Far different," he added, with a quick smile, as if he answered her unasked question.

"Would you rather that the 'Come' were said to you, then?" she said in a slow tone, which for one instant, but one instant only, made his pulses throb.

"I feel as if I would like to be treated as I have been treating the troops there—sent to the right and left; only the simple duty of obedience before me, until a more brave and sensible ambition comes. As it is," he added, stooping to speak more low, "what I am and do, I will be and do—God helping me—as well and heartily as I can. Were you admiring Fenella? You may safely touch her; she will be gentle and still under your little hand. You see she enjoys it."

"What a beautiful creature she is!" said Tom, as Leaholme watched Hester, still standing close beside her. Without moving, he drew Fenella back a little, and spoke to Hester. "My sword is heavy on your dress, Miss Bruce. Just give it me—into my right hand."

She did so, wondering at his request, and he took it with a smile and proud bend of his handsome head, which brought a quick, vivid blush to her cheeks.

"Lane, take care of yourself!"

Fenella was shying back as the earl mounted, and Tom's nose, as Hester said, was in imminent peril. Then, to her intense admiration, the beautiful black mare, with arched neck and dainty steps, trotted across the field.

"There is Sir Randal Platt, I declare!" exclaimed Tom, presently. "There with the Berkeleys. Now he sees us."

It was too late for Hester to turn away, as she would have

wished, and he came up to them with an evident eagerness in his heavy steps.

"Such a pleasure to find you, Miss Bruce! though not an unexpected one, as I came to the field to see those whom I hoped to see, not the little parade over there."

"We came to see the cavalry," said Hester, with a little scornful setting of her lips.

But though she said so, he noticed that she turned resolutely away from the soldiers then, and walked rapidly toward their own carriage. Sir Randal, keeping close beside her, found it difficult to attract her attention by his half-whispered remarks.

"Hark, Lane," he said, angered by his want of success, "did you ever hear such shouts as Leaholme bestows upon those poor idiots of his? It reminds me of the lading of a Dutch merchantman. More natural to him, I dare say, Miss Bruce, than the soft accents with which he is wont to address you ladies."

"Rather more suitable to the occasion," she answered, frigidly. "If we stood a hundred yards away from him, and awaited his order, we should be glad to have it distinctly spoken."

"You are generous to the absent, Miss Bruce," he said, in his gayest tones; "in poor Leaholme's presence you read his character more justly. You have had occasion to prove his hypocrisy, as I have unfortunately had, too."

Hester felt ready to sink in her self-accusation; her face grew hot with shame.

"You can hardly judge," she said, commanding her voice with a great effort; "and Lord Leaholme would not thank me to discuss his character with any one."

She moved quickly up to the carriage-door as she spoke; but Sir Randal was in time to take the footman's place, and for a moment her hand rested on his arm. As he closed the door and leaned that arm upon it, he bent and touched the spot where her hand had lain with his lips, quietly and unobserved. Hester leaned back silent in her seat, while they all talked together about the coming ball. She heard him engage Bella for a particular dance, then she was aware that he was asking her for the honor, too.

"I am not going to the ball, Sir Randal," she said, bringing her eyes unwillingly from the distant scene to rest upon his expectant face.

"Not going!" he cried, the expectancy all dying instantly. "What shall—— How can you allow that, Mrs. Bruce?"

"I have nothing to do with it," she replied, raising her eyebrows languidly. "What can I say to a flat, contradictory 'No?'"

"A flatter, more contradictory 'Yes,'" answered the baronet, a rather angry frown passing over his crest-fallen face.

"She is rather too old for that," put in Bella, gayly: "she would rebel, should not you, Hessie?"

"Yes," said Hester, quietly, her eyes going back to the troops, and her ears closing to the gay talk between Bella and Sir Randal.

At last he sauntered off to hear the speech of the reviewing officer, and the carriages began to leave the field.

"A very good speech, Isabel," said Mr. Bruce, as he rode back from the crowd. "Are you ready now? Put the horses in, Hervey, and drive straight to The Arundel Arms. You will be at the windows then in time to see the troops pass. Where's Tom?"

Just then he came up with Sir Randal; and, because it was discovered that he, too, was staying at The Arundel Arms over the ball, Tom gave him the seat inside the carriage, and seated himself on the box.

They reached their room in time, and Mrs. Bruce and Bella took possession of a window from which they could look all down the street up which the regiment would pass.

"This is a pretty good place for seeing. Come, Hessie," said Tom, moving the curtains back and putting her a chair; while Sir Randal skillfully stationed himself opposite and monopolized the rest of the window, Tom, with ready politeness, standing behind his mother and sister.

Four abreast, the yeomanry passed under the windows, riding well and regularly to the well-known march, "*Der Krieger's Lust*;" and as the little glittering group which surrounded the hussars advanced, the colonel raised his head with a slow, long look at the window where Bella sat and smiled down. Without smiling or saluting, he passed his eyes on to the next window, where the two eager faces were looking away from him to where the first troops were halting; rested them there a minute, then resumed his light discourse with the other gentlemen, while Fenella felt the bit tightened in her mouth for no apparent cause.

"Are you going to dine at mess, Sir Randal?" asked Tom,

as the crowd dispersed in the street below, and there was nothing more to look at.

"I am invited, my dear fellow; are you?"

"Yes; so we may as well go together," said Tom, rather pleased at being addressed as "dear fellow" by a baronet twice his age, and such a lion in the fashionable world as Sir Randal must have been—taking his one view of the matter.

Just as dinner was announced in Mr. Bruce's room, they too came in dressed, ostensibly to say *au revoir*, inostensibly to exhibit themselves.

"You may as well say good-night to me in English," said Hester; "I have no anticipation of *revolving* either of you to-night."

"Miss Lane looks as if she fancied you would sit up for her return," said Sir Randal, rather eagerly. "Am I not right, Miss Lane?"

"I expect she will," returned Bella, carelessly.

Sir Randal gave an odd little twist to his heavy red mustache, which hid a smile upon the lips below it, and Tom took Hester's hand and said good-night.

"Let me look at you, Tom," said his step-father, laughingly putting up his glasses.

"Well, sir?"

"Well, sir, is it? Yes, I think so, too. You do look *very* well, sir."

"Do I look worthy to accompany him, sir?" inquired Sir Randal, turning merrily for inspection.

They all laughed, though no one answered but Bella, who murmured something about not being ashamed of having reserved a valse for him.

And he did look well, too. As there are said to be so many cowards "who wear yet upon their chins the beard of Hercules or frowning Mars," so there are many villains who wear yet upon their shoulders the heads of happy, honest-hearted men.

Down the brilliantly-lighted staircase, laughing in rather a free-and-easy manner, went Tom and Sir Randal.

Hervey heard the laugh grow louder when the carriage-door was shut, and he hurried his horses through the streets as he might have hurried them had he known how ruin-fraught was every hour that cemented the link between those two who sat behind him.

"All right, Hervey," cried Tom, as he sprung down at the

mess-room door; "come here for us after leaving the ladies at the Assembly Rooms."

"Yes, sir."

Tom's handsome, boyish face disappeared in the crowd inside the door, and Sir Randal followed more deliberately. Hervey leaned down from his seat, just to see what he could discover inside before leaving.

"Good-night, Hervey."

A pleasant voice, which the Churleigh coachman well knew, spoke below him, and Lord Leaholme, his full dress uniform glittering under his long blue cloak, walked slowly in, speaking, nodding, and saluting many in the crowd as it made way for him.

Two hours later Hervey and his horses waited on the same spot; one, at least, of the three growing very impatient.

A call came at last. "Draw up his lordship's carriage. The colonel's carriage."

Leaholme's servants nodded comically to Hervey as they passed him.

There was much noisy laughter approaching the door; that free, loud, boisterous laughter which you seldom hear—and never like to hear—when there are ladies in the party. Tom came gayly into the street and looked among the servants. Leaholme followed, towering above the men about him, laughing lightly, as they all were, but the handsome, sunburned face looking very cool and firm in contrast to many that were there.

"Will you come with me, Lane?" he said. "I have room for six portly aldermen in here."

"Indeed I will," replied Tom, turning round to look for his companion. "Platt and I together will help to fill it for you."

"Oh, Sir Randal Platt came with you, then?" he said, as he waited for the baronet to take his seat.

"Deuced hot to-night, dancing in uniform, I should think, eh, Leaholme?" Sir Randal asked, as they drove off.

"I must try before I tell you. I am not obliged to dance if I find it so."

"I don't know," laughed Tom. "I guess you will have a great deal to do."

"At any rate, you open the ball," put in Sir Randal. "I do not envy you that honor with the heavy old duchess. Is there any hope of her abdicating?"

"Not the slightest fear," he answered, pleasantly. "I hope you do not envy me either, Lane?"

"I do not care much about this ball, any way," said Tom, a little affectedly. "There is no one going for whom I care one fig."

"How is that?" asked Leaholme, moving his face out of the lamp-light.

"Hessie would not come, you know."

The pause was scarcely perceptible before Leaholme answered, with an odd little laugh:

"Surely you will be able, among the hundreds of ladies there, to find a substitute for Miss Bruce."

"Not an easy matter," said Tom, brusquely; "is it, Sir Randal?"

"I did not quite follow you," he replied, smoothly. "Did you ask if I supposed it possible there would be any lady in the assembly to-night who would rival your cousin in the opinion of either of us three?"

"Yes," said Tom, his face flushing a little more deeply red than it had been when he came from the mess-room, and feeling rather ridiculous.

"Well, then I say I hope there will be no one to obliterate her from your memory. I fear there will be no one to obliterate her from Lord Leaholme's; and I know there will be no one to obliterate her from mine."

Tom laughed rather uneasily, regretting his silly idea; and for the rest of the drive they were silent. But never again could those three meet without being conscious, each one, of knowing the other's secret, and of his own being known. Such a contrast there was between them, in spite of that one thing! So far apart were the hopes and aims of each in all but this one; and so differently was this one hope nurtured.

Among the gayest and most noticed were they in all the crowd that night, each winning admiration different from the other. And in all the glamor, all the excitement, their thoughts would rest upon one absent girl who sat alone in a big, strange room, with two white arms upon her knees, and a pale, regretful, tender face settled in her hands; watching the glowing fire, just as she might have watched a dear companion's face.

The enjoyment of the ball was at its height; ribbons and laces and flowers had begun to be scattered in the room (the

spoil of the Battle of the Spurs), when the graceful black-robed figure rose with a quick impatience.

"Little fire," she said, "you are but a sad companion, as the night wears on. I must sing a song or something to 'away with melancholy.' If I had but Dick Swiveller here, or a piano! What shall I sing? I think I must make a song of my own; it will take up the time so famously. Now what shall it be about? It's 'Oh, to be a poet!' I suppose I would rather be a poet than anything; but, as I cannot be anything or a poet, it is no use making the choice, I suppose." The song was a very trifle, truly; but the experimentalizing until "the words fitted the air, and the air fitted the words," as she technically described it to herself, whiled away the time wonderfully. Then she sung it through, again and again, ending with a little laugh at herself in the light of poet and composer.

Presently, as she glanced at the time-piece, astonished to find it was three o'clock, she heard a step upon the stair. "Are they coming home so early?" she thought, turning to look as the door opened. Her bright, expectant eyes dropped suddenly as Tom came in, unsteady in his gait, his cheeks flushed, and his eyes restless.

"Hessie, dear," he said, laying one hand upon hers, "it was so dull there without you that I was obliged to come away."

"Dull!—have you been there, Tom?" she asked, looking down coldly on the slight hand that was on hers.

"Yes, horridly dull. So I am come home to you, dear, to sit and talk to you a bit. It will be worth all that hot, tiring work over there."

"You did not think so a few hours ago. Oh, Tom, Tom, why have you come home to me so?"

She had laid her other little cool hand down upon his, and was looking at him with intense sorrow and surprise in her loving eyes.

He raised his eyebrows sleepily. "What do you mean by 'so,' dear?"

"The cousin who said good-night to me seven hours ago had a bright, frank face, Tom; and steady hands, which I liked to hold as I said good-bye. The cousin who comes back to me now has a face I do not dare to look upon, and hands I cannot touch without a shudder. Oh, shame for me to have to say it!"

He looked at her reproachfully, but the pain he saw in her quivering face broke down his fictitious defiance of the truth.

"Oh, Hessie," he cried, with childish plaintiveness, "don't be hard upon me to-night! I was led on to do it in that thirsty place."

"I thought you were led on," said Hester, coldly.

"I had not much, Hester, indeed. It was the excitement. I did not say any one led me on."

"You were wise to come home, Tom," she said, very gently; with a pitying gentleness which even surprised him. "And oh, Tom, do not let any one else see your shame!"

"If *you* are ashamed, it is worse than any one else," he muttered.

"But I shall not see you so again, I pray and trust, dear cousin. Now, good-night. I shall never speak of this again; but in the quiet morning you will have two memories of yourself, and I pray God He will let you keep and guard the true one—the one we all love. Good-night."

"Good-night, dear," he whispered, forbearing, with a spark of true shame, to touch her hand again.

As Tom's footsteps died away, there came along the passage Sir Randal Platt; a loose, light overcoat thrown over his evening dress, the sleeves hanging empty. He turned coolly at the open door, but started at sight of Hester's white face.

Neither his voice nor his hand shook as Tom's had done, yet she turned from him with infinitely greater disgust than she had turned from Tom. Seeing no attempt on her part to address him, he plunged at once into a conversation before he had ventured to join her on the rug.

"Your friends are enjoying themselves greatly, Miss Bruce, your cousin in particular. She is dancing everything."

"Yes," said Hester, standing in front of the fire with her back to him, and tapping impatiently with her foot upon the rug.

"Particularly did she seem to enjoy dancing with the ladies' darling. Of course, you know whom I mean, Miss Bruce?"

"No."

"The colonel of this noble yeomanry corps. They have enrolled him lion of the day, and it strikes me that is the very sort of celebrity to suit him. He seemed to me to revel in the sight of the little spiteful tempers which would peep

out through the anxious efforts made by the sex to attract his attention."

"Do you forget, Sir Randal, that you are speaking to one of them now?"

He laughed softly. "I do not forget to whom I am speaking, Miss Bruce. I could forget my own existence sooner. You are, though, so far above such infatuation, that I speak of it to you as of a distant weakness. What I tell you is indeed true, and the ladies really are showing their desperate anxiety to please him."

"Perhaps he dances well. I should fancy he would," said Hester, with inimitable nonchalance, as she rearranged two of the figures on the chimney-piece, studying, with her head thrown back, the effect of the change she had made.

"Perhaps so. It is an accomplishment we men at least will not envy him, or seek to emulate him in."

"I cannot fancy you, Sir Randal, seeking to emulate him in anything."

"My tastes are, I trust, a little more manly; such tastes, I think, as Miss Bruce herself would expect in a man."

"You are a better sportsman, for instance, than the Earl of Leaholme."

"I hope so, indeed. I am no coward; and if I judge poor Leaholme rightly—or hear aright—he is."

"A poor shot at a tiger, you doubtless judge him; a poor one to fight hand to hand with a vicious, greedy fellow who had a dangerous appetite."

"Pooh! that is nothing. You have seen a tiger's skin about his place, I suppose?"

"Yes, and I have heard from my cousin a certain story of the jungle. I have heard, too, of a young soldier's conduct in scenes which coward hearts would never face."

"I begin to think, Miss Bruce," said the baronet, in a voice whose passion he could not hide, "that you would have been in the majority to-night. I was considered most daring because I set up here and there an equal claim with the hero. In one or two cases, where I rivaled him, I caused intense surprise."

"I dare say," said Hester, in a tone of exquisite content.

"If the rooms had been graced by the presence of one who could have so truly graced them," he continued, softly advancing toward her, "I should have had more courage still, and caused still more astonishment."

Hester drew back coldly, and spoke with careless indifference.

"Did you say Miss Lane was enjoying herself?"

"Immensely. She looks pretty to-night."

"She generally does," spoke Hester, when he stopped, without a shadow of the jealousy he tried to provoke.

"Does she? I never had the leisure to remark it. And Lord Leaholme," he added, trying once more—and this time with desperate earnestness—to read what sign of jealousy there might be, "Leaholme is paying her a most marked attention."

"Is it altogether a most pleasant ball?" asked Hester, trembling, and longing for him to leave her.

"To me it was chaos wanting the one spirit that could have touched it into beauty. I left early, as you see, for that reason."

"Not very early," she answered, pointing to the clock. "I wish you good-night, Sir Randal."

He bowed. Her hands were kept back so proudly that he could not venture to offer his; for even *he* could feel there was something in the sweet young face that would not brook a liberty, as well as something which kept him from daring to offer it. "Something," he said to himself, sitting down in front of his bedroom fire, and frowning into it, as he thought this quietly over and recalled the new sensations this girl had taught him—"something that keeps a fellow wretchedly at bay when he wants to go on saying particular things; yet something that has drawn me on, and is drawing me on now, as not a living soul has drawn me before. How I hate that fellow the instant she mentions him."

As we have ventured to take a peep into Sir Randal's solitude, we may venture to take one into another solitary chamber before sleep and silence settle down upon The Arundel Arms, as they do when the dawn flashes clear and white outside the shuttered windows.

"Can I help your lordship?" asked one of the hotel servants, throwing open Lord Leaholme's door for him; "your lordship's gentleman is gone to bed."

"All right. I told him to, for he has to leave with me early in the morning. No; I need no help, thank you. Good-night."

Lord Leaholme threw off his uniform rather wearily. "That farce is over," he said, in his bitter thoughts, "and I can recall days when I have taken off my scarlet, tattered and

blood-stained, after the scenes of which the thought can make my head throb even now; yet the struggle has never been so hard, the fight has never been so keen as it has been to-day. And can I really own that?" he said, pacing his room slowly, "though only here in my own room, and to no one but my own self? I—a hardy, weather-beaten soldier? The pride of my father's house must surely have deserted me. A craven in every sense of the word must I be, to hasten away from her because I dare not trust myself to look upon her dear, dear face. I am so glad that I got Tom to come away to-night before any one there had noticed him. I hope she was not up, because—she is fond of him. But if she was up, then she would have been up later, too, and would have seen him—worse. Poor Tom! poor, pleasant, loving Tom! How strange it is that I cannot envy him, even though she—is fond of him. I feel somehow as if—in a far distant time, perhaps—I must needs win a little love from her, by the very depth and intensity of my own. Yet battling with this all the time is the full hopelessness of having tried and failed, and promised never to try again—as I never will. Yet I never can envy Tom. I think that only as myself could I love her as I do, and I think I would rather love her as I do than love her less and win a little love in return. With His help, who can purify every earthly passion, I will love her with a love that is not wholly selfish; and do the little that I can to help one whom she—is learning to love."

Through a closed door a little way beyond Lord Leaholme's comes Hester's merry laugh.

"What trophies you must have left behind you, Bella! You are tattered and torn as that immortal individual who married the maiden all forlorn."

"I am so glad you sat up!" was Bella's yawning reply. "You will help me? Mamma always keeps Horton such an unconscionable time."

"Have you enjoyed yourself as much as you have danced?" inquired Hester, as she began to unlace the tight little bodice.

"Quite as much," replied Bella, but with a certain want of heartiness in the ready words which struck on Hester's ear.

"I will not ask you about it till morning—at least, till later on this morning, for I am sure you are very tired."

"Not a bit," replied Bella, hastily. "I will tell you all about it. It was a splendid affair—oh, splendid! and some people said Marian Berkeley was the belle. She had a long

curl from her chignon, Hessie; and *you* know how short her hair is, and *I* did not even think it a good match. And some said Lady Emily Thorpe was the belle, and some said somebody else. You must guess."

"You, Bella," said Hester, looking over the head below her into the glass opposite: her sad, dark eyes roaming from one face to the other.

"Yes; some said so. Of course Lord Leaholme was the principal person there among the gentlemen, and every one was wanting to dance with him, though I never saw a nicer lot of gentlemen at any ball before."

"You mean *he* said you were the belle?" said Hester, simply, as she extracted from Bella's head the flowers and paddings which had raised it half a foot. "I am glad it was he, because he would not say it without meaning it, as Sir Randal Platt, for instance, would."

Now, as it *had* been Sir Randal Platt who had said it; and as even Bella could not help feeling that he had said it to half a dozen of his partners; and as there lay a little scented trifle under her hand on which the Earl of Leaholme's name was written only once, Bella did not receive this remark of Hester's so complacently as she might have done had the version she had given borne looking into.

"Of course he means what he says," she said, shaking her crisp hair impatiently, as Hester took out the last pin.

"Did you dance much with him, Bella?"

"Do not I always?" asked Bella, snappishly. And Hester forebore to question further.

"You forgot to bid me good-night," she said, as Bella at last lay down. "I do not intend to act your maid without a word of thanks, Miss Lane. Sit up, and give it me at once."

"Good-night," sleepily said Bella, from her pillows.

"That will not do," laughed Hester, "sit up."

Bella rose on her elbow. "Now give me a kiss, quick, and go to bed and to sleep. It is high time, I am sure."

Hester bent and kissed her gently. "Good-night, Bella. I intend to leave all the balls for you. You enjoy them; and to-night I feel as if I never could."

Bella—left alone on the verge of a deep, sound sleep—just managed before sliding over the border, to acquit herself honorably in her own mind from any shadow of reproach. She had told no falsehood, she knew; if Hester misunderstood her, why, that was plainly Hester's fault. There was

truth in all she said, and she might sleep through these few hours blessed with an untroubled conscience; to dream of various satisfactory speeches that had been whispered to her, and of a few that she would have preferred hearing, if possible.

Hester—alone in her own room at last—gave one long look out upon the fair, cold dawn, and said, in her sore and tired little heart, “It is too late now ever to hope for it. I must try to remember always that the Rest lies farther on.”

CHAPTER XXV.

A BIRTHDAY PRESENT.

ON a certain chill autumn morning Hugh Delahoyde found himself loitering unaccountably, before setting off from his city lodgings to the house of his two pupils, in Clapham—his only two pupils. He had given his little sister a doubly loving farewell kiss, and yet he hesitated before leaving her in the small, cheerless room.

Three months before he had come from Aberswys to London, thinking it would be such an advantage to him, in seeking employment, to be “on the spot.” He had found it but a dreary spot to be on, after all. While he was daily looking up the clerks in the agency offices, he had said, he might take a few pupils, for children were so abundant in the great metropolis that there could be no scarcity of pupils.

It was not very good for Tottie, he had added, with a sigh; but it was only for a time, and was his best chance of getting her at last a home among the fields and flowers, which she longed for.

So Hugh came to London, and found himself learning daily a harder lesson than any he could give to the two pupils whom he had at last met with.

“Vacant curacies were unusually scarce just now; an unusual number of candidates upon the books.” So the clerks said, day after day, when he “looked them up.” Should they advertise for him once more? But Hugh, beginning to feel that half-crowns were as scarce as curacies, hesitated longingly for a moment, his face flushing crimson; then said, his face paling miserably, no, not just yet, he thought. But knowing that this is an old, old story, and a sad one to boot,

we shrunk from following Hugh through those long three months he had already spent on his hard and toilsome journey; so much the harder and the bitterer from the consciousness of his little sister's unsatisfied wants, and unattainable, unuttered longings.

This was the morning of her birthday, and so it was that Hugh kissed her with a tenderer anxiety than ever; a sadder anxiety, too, for the wee face was visibly paler now day by day, and the little voice—always so cheerful and uncomplaining—grew fainter and slower.

Hugh walked very rapidly to his pupils' grand, warm house—a long three-miles' walk it was from his cheap lodgings—looking neither to the right nor left; trying not to think; trying, above all things, not to feel that the postman must be leaving at his own door just then an acceptance of a certain MS., upon which he had bestowed so much thought and care that he had to *try* to make himself doubtful of its success, he was so much inclined to be confident over it; knowing it had been carefully and thoughtfully written and rewritten, and then posted with a heart-felt, silent prayer,

He gave his lessons as earnestly as if his whole heart had been in his work and he had no little sick sister at home; then walked round to the offices to be greeted with the old tidings. With his chilling answer he turned homeward at last, in the fading light, that was, as it faded, killed and crushed by the dazzling glare from the shop-windows. Hugh looked in mechanically as he passed, feeling and turning over the few shillings in his pocket. There were so many things that would have charmed little Tottie after her lonely day in their bare room; so many that would have brought a little health and color into the tiny pinched face; but, then, there was the rent to be paid to-morrow, and hardly anything in the house. Yet he never *had* let Tottie's birthday pass without a little present of some kind, and he never could so long

as—

Hugh broke off that thought hurriedly, and entered one of the most busy of the shops with a shilling in his hand. A cheery, well-dressed young shopman, who looked to Hugh as if he had never known what it was to go without a dinner, as he had done that day (dining on the glass of sherry and biscuit which had been sent in to him as lunch), offered to send the gentleman's parcel; but Hugh—with rather bitter politeness—would not trouble him. He walked home more

quickly now, with the hard, round parcel in his hand, and opened the door of his sitting-room noiselessly, peeping around it to surprise Tottie. But the child lay asleep on the stiff leather chair, and Hugh stepped softly to it and looked down on her, his face growing very sad and hopeless. Yet, how could he pray to keep her? How could he ask her tender Father in Heaven to let him have her with him in his poverty and want, even for one more year—to let her wait and suffer with him instead of being forever happy?

The big dark eyes opened wide, and Hugh bent down and took his little sister on his knee.

"I was dreaming, Hugh," she whispered, hardly quite awake yet.

"I saw it, lazy little housekeeper. Where is the tea?"

"I asked for it twice, Hugh, and they haven't brought it. I said the second time that if they were busy I'd carry the tray up, but they said they couldn't have me bothering about down-stairs. And, indeed, Hugh, I didn't bother much. I only stood at the kitchen-door, and said if they pleased I could carry the tea, as they were busy. They wouldn't let me, though I waited a good while—only by the door, Hugh, and I said I should so like you to see tea laid when you came in, and might I take it up if I took each thing in one journey. They only laughed, though, and called me a chit, so I came away at last, and——"

"Cried yourself to sleep, and proved yourself a decided chit? As if I could not see," said Hugh, laughing a little, but with an ominous tightening of his lips.

"And, oh! Hugh, I dreamed I was in the fields, and roses were growing all about, and I was just going to gather them when I awoke."

"I suppose I came in just then, dear, as I should have come into a dream, and gathered them for you."

"When will you take me, Hugh?"

The little fragile fingers went up to his face coaxingly, and the big, tired eyes were full of longing.

"Very soon, darling, very soon," answered Hugh, thinking miserably of the long, lonely hours the child spent day after day uncomplainingly in the dull little back street, but his voice telling no tale in the darkening room.

"I shall be able to walk without any new boots, Hugh; don't you mind about that. Did you get yours, as you promised?"

"Not yet, dear. These do very well at present. There are no holes, and I like a few patches."

"You have changed, Hugh," said the child, softly, laying her head on his shoulder; "you usen't to like patches in your boots so well as none."

"Didn't I? When could that have been? It must have been when I was a conceited little boy, and if so, *you* never remember it, you wise little lady."

"Hugh," she asked, suddenly raising her head and kissing him wistfully, "you can afford them, can't you?"

"There was a French king, once upon a time," he answered, with a laugh, "who could not get a new pair of boots unless he paid for them beforehand. Since those days, I believe, there have been English subjects treated in the same unlawful manner."

"Was that a good king?"

"Well, it depends a good deal on what history you read. You shall judge for yourself to-morrow."

"And won't the shops let you have the boots, Hugh?"

"On those terms, you mean? I never asked them, dear. I am always able to pay for mine when I buy them."

"Oh, I am so glad!" cried the child, never detecting the quibble. "And you will give me the king to read?"

"Not himself, exactly. I will give you his history, and you shall tell me what you think of him when I come home."

"Oh, Hugh, it is so nice when you come home!" said Tottie, the clinging attitude telling Hugh a dreary, unspoken little tale of loneliness and longing.

"Did you enjoy your dinner, dear?"

"Yes. Did you have a nice dinner to-day, Hugh?"

"Very nice, my darling."

"I am so glad you have it always in a big house, with lots of servants and gravy and things."

"But ought not we to have our tea now? I will go myself and see to it while you untie your packet. I hope that is not the postman at the door," said Hugh, hesitating before he left the room, his eyes curiously eager, "because, if it is, there will be a gossip before I can get attended to. And that reminds me, Tottie. Did nothing come for me this morning?"

"What should come, Hugh?" asked the child, her white face growing a little whiter, and her baby lips very tight.

"Nothing, exactly, dear. I did not expect anything, ex-

actly; only there might have been a—letter, or a packet, or—both. Was there?”

“Oh, Hugh,” she cried, throwing her arms round his neck, “yes, it came back, and I hid it! I didn’t want to tell, because it was my birthday, and I wanted you to be happy. I hid it away. Oh, why did they send it back to-day, and spoil our pleasure? You said it was to pay the doctor’s bill, and there would be no doctor’s bill only for me. I’m so expensive, Hugh. And you brought me a birthday present, and yet you get no money. If they only hadn’t sent it back to-day, Hugh! I’d rather have had this day happy, than ever so many happy returns.”

“My pet,” said Hugh, in a low, tender voice, which he had been trying to steady, “I do not mind this. I quite—I quite expected it back; and if I do not mind, why should you? We will not bring it out of its hiding-place, will we? though I am very curious to see where you put it. We will enjoy our evening, and never think about it. And you shall have the happy returns, too. Kiss me for that parcel once more, dear, and then I will go and entreat Mrs. M’Allister to listen to the demands of our appetites. Perhaps she will listen to me if the postman is gone.”

Hugh was so long away that Tottie at last went to look for him, full of thanks for her little pot of green-gages. She had not to go far. He was leaning against the wall outside their door, with an open letter in his hand; his face pale as death, his eyes with a glistening light in them. Tottie, clinging to him, drew him into the room in her gentle, serious way. And then he dropped the letter, drew the little figure passionately to his breast, and, bending his head upon it, cried like a child.

Like a child! Ay, sobbing far more unrestrainedly and passionately than the child beside him, who could not comprehend this burst of unutterable joy—a joy which had unmanned him as sorrow had never done. Gradually the tears ceased, and Hugh looked at his little sister with a face she hardly recognized.

“My darling, my pet, you shall see the fields and flowers, and live among them; and have everything you want; and grow well, and tall, and strong; and have so many, many, happy returns!”

“And you?” asked Tottie, half bewildered.

"I? With my whole heart I will work for my kind and pitying God."

Still not understanding, Tottie picked up the letter and looked at her brother.

"Read it, dear," he said, "read it yourself."

Holding it tenderly, because she felt that somehow it was very good, she began to read, Hugh holding her in his arm and looking over, too. The clear, free handwriting was easy to read, even by her; but only gradually did she take in the fact that a great gift had been bestowed upon Hugh. At the end of a kind, short letter, the Earl of Leaholme wrote:

"I need not tell you how long I have been in discovering your address. I found it at last by guessing at one of your advertisements, and following it up. I shall take the liberty of making further use of that same address by calling on you to-morrow morning, as I want very much to see little Miss Tottie. After that I hope you will be kind enough to me and to your parishioners to come and take possession of the rectory at once. Poor Ruyglen has been without a rector far too long, and as you have been the cause it is but fair that you should bring the remedy as soon as possible. You have no idea how glad I am to be able to give my people into the care of one whom I have learned to respect so highly. With kind remembrances to Miss Tottie—who will have a great deal of trouble now to get the roses in order in her new home, and must let me help her—I am, ever truly yours,

"LEAHOLME."

Close the door tenderly, silently, on those two grateful hearts! Close the door as the little figure slips down at her brother's knee with shaking lips, and a face which (in all his joy) it almost breaks his heart to see; and the young voice whispers softly:

"This is God's Birthday Present! Hugh, won't you pray?"

"A gentleman for Mr. Delahoyde, are ye saying? What sort of a une? It's the first visitor *he's* been blest with, then, that's all. It's a bailey?"

"I told you a gentleman, didn't I, mother?" retorted Miss M'Allister, haughtily. "I dare say he ain't anything over-particular, though, for he came on his own feet, and it rained hard enough."

He walked away, too, and on his own feet still; but next

day there was great astonishment in Mrs. M'Allister's household, for he appeared again in a large, low carriage, with a pair of horses and a pair of servants; and yet himself wrapped the little girl in a soft rug and furs, and put her snugly on the cushions, and Mr. Delahoyde had actually been in to thank them for their rather doubtful kindness to his sister, and had paid his "little bill" without a word of complaining and grumbling. And really the M'Allisters did not know but what it was, after all, a pity they were gone.

A pity they were gone. The words would have sounded like a mockery to Hugh if he had heard them, as he drove away from the little bleak sitting-room in which the two had lived so hard, so poor a life—drove away, talking of the new, rich, country home, where Tottie would win back her healthy brightness, and her light, elastic step; and where he could work as he had yet only dreamed of working.

CHAPTER XXVL

GONE.

HESTER and her cousins walked toward Ruyglen in the autumn afternoon, planning how, if Tottie were able, she was to go with them next day for a long ride on the pony Lord Leaholme had given her; and then to go back with them to Churleigh to see the flowers, and have a grand tea in the school-room.

It was only a few days before, that Hester had made her formal call upon the new rector, with the Churleigh ladies; and Tottie—keeping as close as possible to her all through the visit, but now and then venturing to begin a shy and short-lived conversation in her character of hostess—had whispered that Lord Leaholme had brought her a little white pony to ride always when she was well enough. "Because," she explained, "when Hugh was a clergyman before, I used to walk about with him; and when I walked with him I always had to run, and that tires me now."

They were still planning little pleasures for the child when they reached the rectory. They turned into the neat lawn just as the sleek little white pony, with Lord Leaholme at its head, stopped at the house-door, and Hugh Delahoyde, waiting there, took his little sister from the saddle. She nestled

in his arms, trembling strangely, though her eyes were bright with happiness.

"Tired, dearest?"

"No, Hugh, not tired. I think. Oh, I've seen such beautiful places! I've seen enough beautiful places for all my life! And, oh, Hugh, the flowers! There can't be beautifuller flowers in heaven than Lord Leaholme's got!"

Hugh smiled as he prepared to carry her, but Leaholme turned his head away. Suddenly the child held out her arms, seeing Hester.

"Have you ever been where I've been to-day?" she whispered, as Hester took her; resting her cheek against Hester's in quiet content. "It was so beautiful; it was like—heaven!"

"I know it, darling; but it is a long way off, so you must rest now," said Hester, noticing a change in the little wan, excited face.

"Hugh will think I'm not getting better, if I'm tired so soon," she murmured, each word the more wearily.

"He thinks little girls ought to rest after a long ride, and I have had a long walk, and want to rest with you." So Hester, holding her closely, and quietly signing the boys away, carried her into the bright, flower-scented room, where the rare autumn sunshine lingered, and sat down in the corner of the low couch. In a very few minutes Tottie fell asleep in her easy attitude, the little head still closely nestling in Hester's neck.

Leaholme kept the boys out in the garden with him; but Hugh sat near the couch, still and silent, waiting for his little sister's waking.

It seemed a very long sleep. Hugh grew nervous and fidgety for Hester, as he watched her motionless nursing; but she smiled at him over the tiny sleeping face, and shook her head at his fear.

Lord Leaholme had taken the boys into the dining-room now, and settled them to an *impromptu* tea, which the servants pressed upon them, but which they took listlessly and without enjoyment. Then he, too, went softly into the quiet drawing-room. The twilight deepened, rapidly and sadly as it does in the late autumn weather, and still the child slept on. At last Hugh stepped noiselessly to Hester's side and whispered. His voice was very low, but its first tone reached the tired little brain.

"Hugh," she murmured, opening slowly the big, dark

eyes, "I am only a little bit tired—only a little bit. I'm thinking of the beautiful places I've seen—or was I dreaming?"

"Dreaming, dear," said Hugh, softly. "Will you come to me now and rest? And to-morrow you shall see more."

"Have I another to see?"

"A more beautiful place than any," whispered Hester, as if the low words came from her lips unconsciously, while she made an imploring sign to Hugh to leave Tottie in her arms.

"And will you come?" asked the child, gently touching Hester's pale cheek with her tiny, transparent fingers.

"Yes, if I may."

"Aren't your little brothers here?"

"Yes," said Hester, understanding who she meant, and watching, with intense anxiety, the little fading face.

"Will you tell them good-night from me, for I can feel it's bedtime? Who's at the window in the dark?"

"Lord Leaholme."

"Ask him to kiss me."

Hugh turned his appealing face, unable to speak; but Leaholme had not waited for that. He was kneeling beside the drooping childish head, his lips on Tottie's.

"Good-night," she said: it was a faint, faint whisper now. "I'm so glad I went with you. Will you show those beautiful places—and the flowers to other little girls too?"

"Yes, dear one, for your sake."

He could only say it brokenly; but she gave him a little happy smile. Then the dark eyes, with their far-off look, wandered to Hester's face.

"I seem as if I couldn't keep awake. Where's Hugh?"

"Here, darling; here, beside you."

"I can't see you."

The big bright eyes were growing dim and heavy.

Hugh put his arm round her, holding his face down until it touched hers.

"You know me now, my pet. Are you in pain?"

"No, no pain—only sleepy. Don't mind it, Hugh; it will go away, and I shall be—able—to do—things, and help you more. I know I—used never to take—care of you, Hugh—as I—used to—mean to. And you—always—did everything for—me. I shall be well—soon—and better—and do more."

"You have always, always been my little darling, and my

great help and comfort," murmured Hugh, brokenly—"always my one dear little friend."

"Have I, Hugh?" whispered the faint, low voice, with a little thrill of gladness in it. "But I could do—more for you now—I have—so many things—now; and I am going to help—the poor—if I can. I am so—rich now—and so happy. Hugh, may I help—you—now—like you used—to say I helped—you—when we were—poor? Hold—me. Dear Hugh! dear Hugh!"

The dreamy eyes, from their loving look upon his face, turned slowly and wearily to Leaholme, a bright light dawning slowly in their depths.

"Listen!"

"What, darling?"

"Hark! hark! I hear——"

"The angel's wings, my dear one. God has sent for his child."

Leaholme's words were so low that they only reached the child herself. The eyes that were fixed upon him closed happily. A brilliant smile lighted for a moment the tiny white face; and then the little guest was welcomed in her Father's mansions.

His lordship had sent for the carriage from Churleigh for Miss Bruce and the young gentleman, Hervey said. Was Miss Bruce ready?

The Churleigh coachman had noticed nothing gloomy about the house. Yet he remembered afterward that he *had* remarked a muffled kind of way about the whole village, even before he had heard the reason.

As he spoke at the rectory door, Hester came quietly down the stairs and into the hall, opening the door of a bright, warm room, and beckoning the boys. They walked out to the carriage together, pale and saddened. Then Hester, staying behind in the silent, shadowy room, put her two hands on Hugh's.

"We shall miss her so sorely," she said, in her low, soft voice, "that we could almost long for her to be back with us, only that we remember how God must have loved her to have called her to be with himself—called her so happily, so peacefully."

Hugh bent over the little hands and kissed them without a word; but Hester was glad to feel that something lay there besides his kiss.

"God sends those tears to comfort breaking hearts," she said to herself, as she followed the boys.

It was a brilliant, starlight night, and as she hesitated at the door, looking up and thinking of the little one who had reached that sorrowless home, a longing that was almost envy seemed to rush into her heart.

"Go! wing thy flight from star to star,
From world to luminous world, as far
As the universe stretches its flaming wall:
Take all the pleasures of all the spheres,
And multiply each through countless years;
One minute of heaven is worth them all!"

The words seemed to fill all the clear air around her, and throb up from her heart of their own free will:

"Take all the pleasures of all the spheres,
And multiply each through countless years;
One minute of heaven is worth them all!"

Then what would that minute of heaven seem, after years, perhaps a life, of sorrows and misunderstandings?

Lord Leaholme stood beside the carriage, waiting for her.

"Do not look so troubled, Miss Bruce," he said, his face very grave, but his words comforting and thoughtful. "We cannot mourn for the little one's happy death; and as for her brother, he is too brave and true a man to grieve without hope. I will bring you word of him in the morning."

And Hester felt strangely relieved to know by these words that he was going to stay all night in the sorrowful house.

Very gently she took Bella's sharp insinuations about the absence of propriety in some of Hester's acts, this one, perhaps, most of all. *She* would not like to have done so bold a thing; but, then, Hester evidently did not value her reputation for either modesty or delicacy.

"To-morrow morning," Hester thought, "I shall see him again."

And how much hope there was in the thought even the hopeful heart itself hardly knew.

He came quite early, when they were all together in the morning-room, and he told them how well Hugh struggled with his grief, and how he had consented to go with him into Warwickshire for a few days after the funeral. And Bella was delighted to hear this, and sent a message of condolence

to the young rector; and Mrs. Bruce begged to know what she could do, and entreated him to understand how happy it would make her to be allowed to do it. And Hester read in the earl's face what Hugh's "consenting" meant, and knew that one of them at least would not hasten back.

He rose to go, and his only words to Hester had been a request for Mrs. Goldsmith's address, as he thought a sight of them would do Delahoyde good while he was so near. Mrs. Bruce and Bella rose, too, and strolled with him down the avenue; for he had walked from the rectory, and was going to walk home.

He was gone once more, and Hester turned from the window while he was still in sight, covering her aching, yearning eyes with both hands.

CHAPTER XXVII.

RESCUED.

THE whitest, frostiest Christmas-eve that could be imagined. "Seasonable weather," as people called it, in their tautological greetings in the market-places; and "jolly" was a word in universal request that morning, while skates were brought out and examined.

Hester, in a short skirt, a rough jacket, and a pair of loose leathern gauntlets, was stopped in her descent to the hall by Tom, who had been propped up on the stairs waiting for her, *he* said, "for ages."

"But I did not expect to see you in walking-dress. Are you really going out before breakfast this bitter morning?"

"I am really going out before breakfast this pleasant morning, Tom. The boys and I are bent on making a snow-man of the snow that was swept out of the north avenue yesterday. Am I not well equipped?"

She looked down at her warm costume, and did not raise her eyes to him again; for since Tom had come home for his Christmas vacation she found herself avoiding, with a nameless dread, his harassed, restless glance. Constantly wondering and grieving about it, longing that he would tell her what his trouble was, she yet almost dreaded he should do so, and avoided meeting his eyes lest her anxious looks into his changed face should pain him, as the consciousness of the change pained her.

"I will go with you, then, Hessie."

"All right; you shall make his head."

"Please let the boys do that alone, and you walk with me. I do not know how it is," he said, slowly, as they turned under the tall, bare trees, "but I find myself continually wanting you; and now that I am in a mess, I come to you involuntarily, Hessie."

"That is right, Tom. Tell me about your mess."

"I am in debt."

"In Cambridge?"

"Yes."

"How deep?"

"Up to my neck."

"Do you mean to say it is a case for hanging?"

"Oh, Hessie," said Tom, looking down upon the bright face at his side, "just imagine my laughing while I tell you this! I had fancied I never could tell you. It makes my life so miserable."

"Of course it does. Debt naturally would; but still a laugh does you no harm, Tom."

"Hessie, I wonder how I ever tolerated Churleigh without you."

"Is it pleasanter with me?" she asked, absently.

"Not only home, but my whole world is pleasanter, dear."

"I am glad of this, Tom, for I make no pleasure for others. But tell me about these debts; how much do you owe?"

"More than three hundred pounds."

"Oh, Tom, you have been gambling!"

Even in his own perplexity he found himself wondering at the sudden horror of the young face to which he looked for his own comfort.

"Yes, it is those infernal billiards. I cannot help it."

"*Cannot!* What words for a man to use!" she said, scornfully.

"I play and lose; and when they sneer, I risk again, to show that I do not care. And, to prevent my caring, I take a good deal of wine; and—it is a horrible temptation!"

"Horrible, indeed!" she answered, very low. "And does it need more strength and courage than you possess to resist such a temptation as *that*?"

"Sometimes I can, but not always; not very often. And now, Hessie, I do not know what to do about this accumulation of debt."

"They are what you call debts of honor, Tom; that is, of dishonor. Are you in debt in other ways?"

"Yes, a little; but it seems nothing in comparison with these."

"You owe your tailor, of course?"

"Do not be hard upon me, Hessie. Yes, I owe my tailor a little."

"How much, do you think?"

"Oh, about forty pounds."

"I would rather pay the tailor than the other men, Tom."

"But the others *must* be paid. What can I do? The governor never suspects anything of the kind. I doubt whether he could imagine it possible; and I painfully feel how little claim I really have upon him."

"Have you money of your own?"

"Only my small allowance; nothing more until I am five-and-twenty, when I believe I shall have just about enough to pay my boot-maker. We were something richer than church mice before my mother's marriage; and you know how tightly my esteemed grandparent ties her purse. Bella finds her way into it now and then; I, never."

"You can pay when you are five-and-twenty, I suppose?"

"The fellows will not wait, even if I could; and I cannot trade upon that money."

"Oh, do not try to do that, Tom!" cried Hester, with a shudder; "I have such a horror of that. I wish you could have my money; but I have no power either."

"Hush! Hester, hush! Do not make me hate myself more than I do. I must even shut your pleasant sympathy from me if you speak of that."

"Then, you see there is but one thing you can do, Tom. You *will* do it, dear Tom, because you must see how it is best. Go to Uncle Alf, and tell him everything. You know how kindly he will help you."

"His astonishment and contempt would be so hard to bear, Hessie, my not being his own son."

"That is a selfish thought; his grief ought to hurt you, *because* it is his grief," she answered, quickly. "Tell him soon, Tom, and make it as little grief as possible."

"I suppose I must; but you little know how I dread it. No, I *cannot* tell him, when mother and Bella are so extravagant. A hopeful family we were to take! How can I tell

him I am worst of all, when he has been so kind to me, and has promised to send me abroad this spring?"

"I would offer to tell for you, Tom, only, as you know, Uncle Alf would never brook that. It would do harm instead of good. From you it will do good, and you will feel so much happier when you have told."

"I feel happier now that I have told you, Hessie, dear."

"And you will do the other?"

"Go in for the private confession? Yes, I suppose I must. I wish Leaholme were here again."

"What good would he do, Tom?" she asked, with a longing wish that she were able to help him instead.

"I cannot tell exactly, but things go more smoothly when he is here. Do you not remark it? Mother never complains of me while he is friendly to me. And Bella is not half so provoking! And the governor is jollier, and pleased with most things. Oh, you must have noticed it."

"I think I have—sometimes."

"Hessie, why have you never liked Lord Leaholme?"

"I did not say I never had."

"No; but you have shown it plainly. When I came home first in the summer, I saw it at once, and ever since."

"We need not talk of him now."

"Dear," said Tom, stopping suddenly and looking down into her face, "do you remember the night you and I drove from Wye Abbey, and the ponies away?"

"Yes."

"Ah! should she ever forget that day, and its one despairing echo—so true, so true?"

"I have let you go."

"You told me that you—liked me then, Hessie. Look back and tell me if you grew to like me better, as you said."

"Yes, I did."

"And I have forfeited it all now by telling you of this?"

"This makes no difference, Tom," she said, in her sweet, pleasant way. "I like you better for telling me—I mean better than if you had kept it secret. Like yourself, I shall be happier when Uncle Alf is told."

"Then I will do it as soon as breakfast is over; and there is the bell, I believe."

"You will tell me about it afterward?"

"Of course."

"We are very confidential cousins, are not we, Tom?"

"We are very confidential, yes, dear; and I am so glad to say it," Tom answered, ignoring the cousinship between them as he always did.

Prayers were over when Hester entered the breakfast-room after changing her dress, and there seemed an unusual excitement at the table.

Mrs. Bruce stood before the urn, unmindful of the half-filled cups, a pleased expression on her face, and an open letter in her hand. Mr. Bruce, from his seat opposite, was looking at her over his paper.

"How does he mean to do it, Isabel?"

"He says he wants to make the most of the two days he can stay at Wye, and thinks a ball on Twelfth-night would be pleasant. He has sent a London man down to the abbey to make all arrangements, and have them carried out before he can return; he hopes to hear from us that we are disengaged, and he says that any guests we may have at Churleigh are included in this invitation, which is written, you see, jointly to you and me. Bella, we must talk this over after breakfast, love. Hessie, shall you go?"

"Yes, I shall like to go very much," she answered, a bright glow upon her face.

"What! in mourning?"

"Perhaps I had better not," she said, quietly, as the color faded again.

"Don't be in such a hurry to decide, Hessie," said Tom, who was very quiet that morning; "let Leaholme's letter speak for itself. Catch!"

He had taken up one of the letters that still lay on the table, and now he threw it over to her. Feeling how her hand was trembling when she took it, she hesitated to break the seal, though longing to do so. Bending her head, she read the quaint old motto on the crest, her thoughts wandering to him who bore it; wandering back to the morning when she had read it first, and thought it such a mockery. *Now* whom did it rebuke?

Bella's laugh almost startled her, so far away her thoughts had strayed.

"Well, he writes me a very urgent invitation. What does he say to you, Tom?"

"Asks me to go in war-paint and feathers," answered Tom, putting his letter down.

"Nonsense!"

"Well, he asks me to go to Wye. You seemed to expect more, so I was obliged to supply it."

"What does he say to you, Hessie?"

Then Hester broke the seal carelessly and easily, knowing he had merely written a form to each of them.

She read the few lines aloud.

"MY DEAR MISS BRUCE—Will you spend your Twelfth-night and thirteenth in my grim old bachelor quarters? I will make them as cheerful as possible for that little time.

"Faithfully yours,

"DOUGLAS ARUNDEL."

"You think you had better not go?" questioned Bella, as she finished.

"Yes; I shall go," Hester answered, quietly.

"Oh, you have changed your mind. And what about the mourning?"

"I shall leave it off."

"On purpose for that night?"

"I must begin some time, Bella. Night is as good as morning."

"That's right, Hessie," said Tom, eagerly. "I knew Leaholme's letter would do it."

"It is not so remarkably entreating," said Bella, coldly.

"No," she answered, laughing: "he does not use much persuasion; but I shall like to go, nevertheless."

"Then you will order a dress," said Mrs. Bruce; "you must try to think what will be likely to become you."

"A hard point to settle, I don't think," murmured Tom, glancing comically up from his plate.

"Bella, will you help me?" she asked. "I am rather unused to this sort of thing."

"I shall have mine down from London, through grandma. Mayn't I, mamma?"

"Yes; but we will discuss it after breakfast. We can help Hester, too, I dare say. What is your parcel?"

"A song from Lydia," replied Bella, blushing and smiling.

"She says the name attracted her, and she felt she must send it me."

"What is the name, then?"

"Bella held the music up, and Hester read, "Douglas."

"Is it a short biography of Leaholme?" asked Mr. Bruce, highly amused.

"What a question, papa! But I will sing it to you to-night, and you will see."

"Or hear."

"Yes, hear. It is so sad. I wonder would he like it himself."

Breakfast went on cheerfully for Bella; but Tom and Hester were unusually silent. When the meal was over, Tom turned to his step-father, asking him, nervously, if he might speak to him for a few minutes.

"Certainly; come to the library."

Hester gave Alf's music-lesson a very divided attention, for her thoughts would hover round the closed door of the library. She did not care to go and arrange about her ball-dress until she had heard from Tom that he had told his trouble and was happier. So she sent the boys away to enjoy the first day of their holidays, and sat at the school-room fire, waiting.

He came—as she had felt sure he would—straight there; but not with the lightened step and relieved face which she had expected. He came in slowly and languidly, and stood with his back to the fire, looking down upon her in her low seat.

"How is it, Tom?"

"I could not tell him, after all."

"Oh, Tom, you never were so great a coward."

"I was an arrant coward; nothing else. But Hessie, his surprise was so intense, and he showed such a scornful horror of every kind of gambling, that I could hardly breathe sitting there opposite him. I wish I had not needed to vex him; he has been very good to me."

"Was he not good now?"

"Too good to be good to me. He kept too far away from me; he did not meet me half-way, as you did, Hessie. Yet he would have helped me in all—as he will help me now in part—if I could have told. But it shocked him so, that—~~that I was a coward, as you said.~~"

"And told him a part only, I suppose."

"Hardly the half."

"Then you said your debts were one hundred pounds."

"Yes; that was all I had courage to do."

"You will tell him more, though?"

"Never; I could not have so painful a scene again. I will leave the country first."

"What a silly thing to say, Tom! Would you not need

money to do that? And would you prosper anywhere in debt? What can you do *except* tell Uncle Alf the whole?"

"I have asked myself the question so often in vain, that I am hopeless of there being any answer extant."

"First of all, you must send the money to your tailor. I have that ready for you."

"Never, Hessie! Never!"

"But you shall pay me again, if you like; and with interest, too; anything you like."

"No; I will never do it."

"Who is the man?"

"Flavel," he answered, unthinkingly; and she noted the name in her mind.

"To-morrow is Christmas day, Tom," she said, as she stood opposite him, her gentle little hands upon his shoulder, and her eyes bright and brave as they looked into his: "do not let any trouble spoil and disturb that for you, but let its influence help you, Tom, in leaving this weak and wicked habit, and beginning a brave new year with higher, better aims. After that, I am going to Birmingham. But when I come back, and Lord Leaholme's ball is over, we shall both see things clearly, and it will all be well arranged with Uncle Alf."

"I am to get my courage up by then, dear, am I? Leaholme will be here, too," added poor Tom, relieved by the respite. "Hessie, I am so glad you are going to the ball; but do you not think I ought to stay at home?"

"As a penance, do you mean?"

"Yes, in a sort of way."

"Do you think we shall all have as much pleasure if you do?"

"Yes."

"No, you do not," she answered, laughing. "This modesty is not at all like my Cousin Tom. We should not, of course, and you must think of us before yourself. Not but what you are dismally wanting to go all the time, and will enjoy it just twice as much as anybody there—except myself."

"You will be the belle, Hessie."

"If you take to nonsense, Tom, as well as other weaknesses, I shall drop the connection," she said, drawing her hands away.

"If that is nonsense, I am at a loss to imagine what may be considered sense; but you will see yourself."

"Yes, I shall see myself—but, unfortunately, not as others see me—that pain being kindly denied us by the Power."

"You will see yourself *how* others see you, eh?"

"Please go now, and let me meditate on dress."

That afternoon Hester and the little boys walked home from the village in the early twilight, after having distributed their few Christmas presents.

As they came within sight of the park gates, a stranger, well-dressed, and with a business-like haste, passed through them, and, after making some inquiry at the lodge, walked on up the avenue.

With an instinctive fear, Hester spoke to the boys.

"You run home now, as fast as you can, dears, and see that there is an immense fire in the school-room; and if it blazes beautifully when I come, I will tell you a real Christmas story while it gets dark outside, and we sit in the fire-light. Run!"

They ran on eagerly, and she overtook the stranger.

"You are come to see Mr. Lane, I believe?"

He raised his hat. "Yes, or if not, Mr. Bruce."

She must be right, she thought, with a sigh of relief. Trying to appear easy and indifferent, she went on.

"That is not necessary, if you would rather not. You come, I think, from Messrs. Flavel, of Cambridge?" (The Messrs. was a happy guess.)

"Yes. I belong to the firm."

"I thought so, and I am very glad to be excused writing to you. Mr. Lane has left me some notes to inclose to you—forty pounds, I think. Is that right?"

"That is a little more than the account," he answered, making a little tale of his own out of the pretty, eager face.

"Then would you kindly sit down in the lodge for a few minutes, and I will bring it?"

He seemed to understand why she asked him to wait there, and he turned with a quiet bow.

In ten minutes' time Hester, with his receipt in her hand—casting no one thought on the certain something for which this money had been saved through two whole years—hurried back to the house in the gathering darkness. As she ran down the laurel walk to enter by a side door, Tom met her suddenly. She could just see that his fair, pleasant face was

clouded even more than she had expected, and involuntarily she touched his arm coaxingly.

"Tom, come and sit at the school-room fire. We are going to tell Christmas stories, and ask riddles, and compose carols."

"I wish I could," he answered, gloomily.

"And why cannot you?"

"I have to walk to Ruyglen on business."

"Business on Christmas-eve?" she laughed. "Were you going toward the station?"

"Yes."

"Had you any letters besides Lord Leaholme's this morning, Tom? Any business letter, I mean?"

"Ye—es," he answered, surprised.

"From Cambridge?"

"Ye—es."

"Then you are expecting a—gentleman, and are too late to receive him. I did that, and a very gentlemanly gentleman I found him. He and I have just parted. Here, take his P. C."

"Show me, Hessie."

His voice was low and hoarse, and his hand trembled as he took the paper. He could understand it, though not read the words in the gloom, and then he folded it, neatly and slowly, and put it into his waistcoat pocket.

"Now will you come?" she asked, frightened at his silence, and the shame upon his face.

"Hessie, I could not. I must walk to stifle this sharp, shamed pain at my heart."

"Then come home cheerful, Tom, and let me pass now."

Quite silently, and before she knew what he was doing, he took her in his arms and kissed her, quietly and tenderly.

"Darling, darling," he said, softly, "this shall never be again! Never again!"

Hester raised her burning face; the surprise and anger all melted away in the gladness.

"Oh, what a happy Christmas-eve!" she said, her heart beating happily to hear his vow; for no cry arose in the quiet evening darkness to tell her it was weak and false.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"DOUGLAS."

A VERY terrible tale Hester told in the fire-light; full to overflowing of giants, and dwarfs, and fairies, as Christmas stories ought to be; full of wonderful adventures and hair-breadth escapes, but ending happily, as Christmas stories ought to end; and leaving the audience in a haunted state of mind, as Christmas audiences ought to be.

When the children's tea came in, Hester went away to dress for dinner. She put on her low black dress and the few diamonds that had been part of her mother's set, "saved from the wreck," as her father had told her bitterly when he gave them to her; almost the only jewels she possessed, the only jewels she should ever care to possess, she used to fancy; and then she stood before the glass and looked at herself. She told of it afterward, feeling silly and ashamed; but she did not feel so then, and would not have thought of moving, had any one come in upon her so.

Strangely and childishly was that ball filling her thoughts! Could it be simply for its novelty, for one who had never been to such a thing before? Could it be only as girls always feel before a ball? Ah, no. Hester well knew it was because she should see him and speak to him—speak to him alone in the solitude and unreserve which, in her ignorance, she imagined must pre-eminently pervade a crowded ball-room. She should see him as she knew him now, good, and brave, and noble; and, perhaps, in this anticipated solitude, win from him a pardoning word. Ah, me, for girlish hopes!

What should she look like in that crowd of beauty and grandeur? Tom had said—but, then, Tom's opinion was nothing; and Mrs. Bruce had told her that her sad deficiency of style would be so much remarked in society. Yet one day some one, who was not Tom, had said she was so beautiful that she ought to be kind.

"Oh, Hessie," she cried, suddenly, shaking her fist at the great wistful eyes in the glass. "If you grow insane and think about those things—you, with that dreary, eager face to think about beauty!—if you do you will become utterly unbearable in every way."

So, with a pirouette and a verse of a song, intended to ward off incipient vanity, or insanity, she ran down-stairs. Mr. Bruce was coming out of his study, and Tom crossing the hall, as she came in sight.

"Here is the check, Tom," said his step-father, going up to him, "for one hundred pounds. Wipe away your debts at once, my boy, and I trust I may never hear this of you again, not even from you; which I hope will be the way I shall always hear of any of your troubles or your triumphs. Remember that, dear lad."

Hester met Tom's unsatisfied eyes as he spoke his thanks, and her heart was heavy, thinking of the untold part of his burden. Her uncle turned to her, exclaiming jokingly on her "Christmas decoration," and she went into the drawing-room with him. How glad she was to see it empty.

"Uncle Alf," she began, still keeping her hands round his arm, "I am going to the ball at Wye Abbey."

"So I presume. Coming out at last, you stiff little blossom?"

"Then I shall be a blossom no more, you see, being out. But, uncle, how am I to come out unless——"

"Well, unless what?"

"Unless I can hold up my head among the other flowers."

"Who is going to rival you?"

"Anybody who is—anybody," she said, with a melancholy sigh.

"And nobody who is—nobody. Practical little person, what do you want?"

"A nice dress, uncle."

"And that is difficult of attainment."

"Very—for me."

"Why, pray?"

"I have no money."

"That should not be, dear. How is it so?"

"I have spent it all."

"You have given away too much, Hessie."

"No, uncle. I spend it on my own pleasure."

"Which is not giving away?"

"Now, Uncle Alf, you know you are straying from the point on purpose. Do let me look nice."

"I do not know exactly how far 'nice' goes; but I see no reason against your looking—respectable. How much will it cost to make the necessary transformation?"

"Two hundred pounds, Uncle Alf."

Blushing, unhesitatingly, she said it, with her heart far away from the wondrous fabric it was intended to represent; with her whole heart in poor Tom's anxiety.

"Just two hundred pounds, Uncle Alf. Oh, let me have it—out of my own money! I shall never want it so much as now."

He looked down upon her oddly. "Hessie, you must have been dreaming of cloth of gold, and are not yet awake. Or are you secretly supporting a committee of destitute seamstresses? My child, get what you will; look the best and fairest there; then show me your bills, and it shall be all right."

"Why not give it me, uncle?"

"I cannot trust your wild calculations, dear."

"Oh, uncle," she cried again, "let me have it!"

"Do you need it for any other purpose?"

The question was so seriously, so almost sadly put, that she trembled under his kind eyes.

"Hessie, are *you* going beyond me, too?"

Hester raised her wistful eyes, full of tears now.

"No, Uncle Alf, indeed. But I do want the money."

"You want new ornaments, then?"

"No; no, indeed."

"These honest eyes are not deceiving me, I am sure," he said, in a different tone. "Choose your own dress, dear child, and leave the rest to me. I dare say it will cost less than Bella's."

The others came in then, and Hester turned away disappointed; yet, perhaps, with a lighter heart than she could have had, had he given her what she so urgently requested for another purpose.

They were rather a dull little party that evening, in spite of the diamonds, and the Christmas atmosphere.

Bella was idle and listless; and turned away in the middle of singing, with Tom and Hester, "Behold, I bring you glad tidings." Hester, left there, played very sadly—as she went back to that day she so well remembered—yet very softly and beautifully, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd."

"Go on, dear," said her uncle, as she finished it and slowly rose; "your playing just suits the night."

She felt it even herself; but felt it in the music apart from

herself. The sweet, hope-giving notes comforted and strengthened her, taking her out of herself.

"I must try my new song now, papa," cried Bella then, rousing herself, and taking Hester's place.

She sang it through rather affectedly, yet it brought sharp, painful tears to Hester's eyes. Through the artificial sentimentality, the tender, despairing words and sweet, pathetic air went straight to her heart:

" ' Could ye come back to me, Douglas, Douglas,
In the old likeness that I knew,
I would be so faithful, so loving, Douglas,
Douglas, Douglas, tender and true.' "

No other words would have come to take their place; no other longing would come to fill her heart. She read, and worked, and talked, but the cry was there under it all. When Bella and her mother were gone to bed, she sat alone in the room, low before the fire, with her face hidden on the couch; trying still to stifle this one pleading cry, trying to take the fullness of the Christmas joy into her longing heart.

"Sometimes I feel as if I could tell him," she thought, as she sat so still in the midnight stillness; "but if I do, I must tell him, too, how—I love him. And then if—I mean—*because* he has ceased to love me—he will be pitiful. Why did I never speak to him of the sin which I laid to his charge? I always felt it so impossible. I knew I should break down in miserable tears, and I did so dread to humble myself in his eyes—in his eyes of all the world! I did so dread to humble myself in the eyes which I thought had looked upon my dying brother, and then shut out the remembrance in coldness and carelessness of the sin. But, oh! if I had but spoken of it then, it could all have been made clear. I should indeed have felt humbled then; and for such humiliation I could have thanked him in my heart, as I prayed for his forgiveness. Now my very prayers seem only cries of sorrow and despair. I was so sure of the justice of my thought! I never for one moment doubted it through all those months when he was trying to make me happy—I, so mean, and base, and despicable!

"What did he think of the hard words I used to say to him? the bitter, wicked things which I always felt sure he would understand and apply in self-reproach, which I intended

only to hurt and pierce him. Now I know how harmless they were to do that. Now they will come back and strengthen his contempt for me. Now that he knows me as I deserve to be known, he despises me as I deserve to be despised. His old love is dead and cold, more dead and cold a great deal than the heart of that Douglas Bella sung of. His, perhaps, beats in Heaven with the old love, tender and true; and he, perhaps, had forgiven her. This love is dead in another, colder, sadder way."

Slowly she raised her head when she heard the door opened; and as Tom came in, she greeted him with a bright little smile.

"Poetizing in the solitude, dear?" he asked, sitting down opposite her, and leaning forward with his arms upon his knees, curiously wondering at the struggle which he read in the young face at which he gazed so intently and fondly. "Have you written the carol you promised me, Hessie?"

"Oh, I quite forgot!" she cried, with a quick blush, which surprised Tom no little. "I will write it now."

And Hester took her pencil, glad and thankful for the relief from that one haunting thought.

"Don't you begin to talk about 'quantities,' and 'feet,' and such things when you read it," she said, after writing fast in his silence, "just as if you knew everything."

"Why, Hessie, every fellow at K. knows what a duffer I am at versification. And don't you remember once last summer how I bestowed endless labor on a regular epic to present to you, and you broke my feeling heart by saying coolly that it was maudlin, and too long, and without finish."

"No doubt of its being too long, it was without finish," said Hester, gravely; "but you know you used to talk in that sort of way over my poetry at Aberswys, much to my disgust, I can assure you, Tom."

"Ah, Hessie, how happy we were at Aberswys!" said Tom, thinking of the restlessness of his life since then, but forgetting where the seed of that wrong-doing had been sown. "I should like that summer over again; should you?"

"No," she whispered, very low; "not unless I could make it all different."

"Then it wouldn't be *that* summer at all, dear, would it?" laughed Tom.

"No. *That* summer is gone forever," she answered: and he started, though he could not comprehend the hopelessness of the quiet tone. "Here it is," she added, with a hasty laugh, when she saw his puzzled glance into her face. "Read it well. Give it every advantage, and imagine forcibly the beauties it ought to contain."

"I hope it is not sad," said Tom, involuntarily, before he began to read; "I shall not get through it to-night if it be. I must read it aloud, dear; I like to feel you are listening:

"THE CHRISTMAS CHIMES.

"A Christmas peal, a joyous peal, a crashing peal!
Open the window wide, that it may reel
Into the hall, amid the festive throng;
Laughing with the merry voices there,
Gladdening every sound of mirth and song;
Then rushing out upon the frosty air,
Repeating to the echoes far and wide
The message of Good-will for Christmas-tide.

"A distant peal, a softened peal, a chastened peal!
Open the window wide, that it may steal
To the sick chamber, with its hymn of Glory;
Breathing softly in a wordless prayer,
Whispering wistfully the old, old story;
Then floating out upon the frosty air,
Answering to the echoes far and wide,
The Saviour's message, Peace for Christmas-tide!

"A merry peal, a dancing peal, a clashing peal!
Open the window wide, that we may feel
It fly from heaven to earth—from earth to heaven;
Strengthening every feeble word of prayer
With its glad song—"To us a Son is given."
Then, swelling out upon the frosty air,
Proclaim the glorious tidings far and wide,
Peace and Good-will thro' every Christmas-tide!

"A midnight peal, a hallowed peal, a dying peal!
Close down the window now, that we may kneel
Mid cheerful faces in the ruddy light,
Or in the chamber, dark with want of care;
It leaves a blessing with us all to-night,
Then dies without, upon the frosty air,
The grand old message shedding far and wide
A deathless glory on the Christmas-tide."

Suddenly Hester raised her head, listening; then passed out to the terrace. The distant Christmas peal of the Ruy-

glen bells reached her here; yet above it, piercing the frosty midnight air, the old cry rang for her:

“Could ye come back to me, Douglas, Douglas.”

And the faint, far-off bells that flung their greeting on the still sky and earth softly echoed her wistful words before her heart could feel the glorious promise in their tones:

“Oh! to call back the days that are not!”

Holding her head between her hands, Hester stood trying to hush this cry—trying to feel the throbbing gladness which the Christmas morning brings.

Slowly it came to her, with its happy, earnest thoughts, and wide, pure promises. Standing in the still, calm darkness which was to herald in the glorious light, she prayed for courage to see the blessings which this light would bring her. Prayed, too, poor child, while a flash burned in her cheeks even in the solitude and darkness, that some one whom she loved might have a happy Christmas-time. And then, with quivering lips, she prayed (though she thought it was only a longing) that, in this Christmas gladness and glory, the cloud might be lifted which now lay low upon her life.

“Oh, Tom,” she cried, as Tom came hastily out to her, “listen to the bells! We only seem to hear a note or two now and then, but are not they full of promise—whispering good tidings?”

“Yes, dear,” he answered, softly, as he folded a cloak around her; “but I cannot let you wait out here in the cold. It is past midnight, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“Then the Christmas is here; so, Hessie, give me my Christmas greeting, dear, and Christmas promise.”

The wondrous longing in her face he could not see. To him the voice had only its own sweet tone. “We will take the whispered one that came just then upon the bells, dear Tom; and you and I, out here together. It seemed to say, ‘Fear not, I am with thee!’ Such a promise that is for the coming year! Such a help for us in the keeping of our better resolutions!”

“If you were with me always, I could do it better,” said Tom, a little consciously.

“While you think that, you will never do it, Tom: you lose the real help so. He has come once more unto His own; and again shall we refuse to receive Him, Tom?”

"I am afraid I am getting so comfortably accustomed to the darkness, Hessie, that I do not feel the need of the light; but I will try; I will indeed, dear, to keep those vows I have made," he said, earnestly. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

She turned and laid her hands upon his. Her face was close to his; and very tenderly, and almost reverently, he bent in the darkness and kissed her lips.

The distant chime that announced the Christmas morning found it impossible to pierce the closed shutters and heavy curtains to find its way into Mrs. Bruce's dressing-room; but she did not miss it, or think of it, as she sat on a small couch close up to her cheerful fire, a bright flannel dressing-gown wrapped snugly about her; while Bella rocked herself slowly on a low chair opposite, a rather sullen expression on her little rosy face, and a fretfulness in every tight wave of the crisp, light hair.

"I do not quite see the drift of all this, mamma," she said, criticising one white boot that rested on the low fender; "he *did* go away, and we cannot help it. It is not very likely that I should have let him go, if it had rested with me; as you perfectly well know."

"Yes," said Mrs. Bruce, slowly, "you are right, love; but still you did not act so wisely as you might have done."

"How, pray?"

"That I cannot tell; but surely you could have prevented his going away in so sudden a manner after that nice day at Wye Abbey, when you were with him so much, love. I did not like his coming back merely for the cavalry week, and going off again as soon as it was over. It was very odd, too, his bringing the Delahoydes; then taking Mr. Delahoyde with him to Leaholme, and letting him come back here alone. *Now* he only talks of coming for two days."

"As if I would not have prevented it if I could," pouted Bella. "I did ask him why he went."

"Did you? And what did he say, love?" inquired Mrs. Bruce, with intense gentleness.

"He said that as long as he had to spend his life in so many nests, he must not spend too long a time in one—even the downiest. Then I said I was sure he must be tired of Churleigh."

"And what did he say to that, dear?" asked Mrs. Bruce,

slowly, crossing her slippered feet, and looking down at them to hide her smile.

"He said—and I don't believe he knew at the time that he was saying it—that he wished he was as fond of any other place on earth."

"That will do, Bella," smiled her mother, after a pause; "he could hardly have said more. How did he look when he spoke to you? I knew what your dear papa meant by his looks months before he spoke to me of love."

"He looked just as usual," replied Bella, a little sharply, as she recalled the look with which the words had been uttered, when he had stood with her out upon the terrace in the moonlight after that—to Bella—very happy day at the abbey. She could only too distinctly recall it; but it was a look, little Bella, as far above your comprehension as the moon rode that night above his brave, bent head.

"I almost wonder," resumed Mrs. Bruce, taking her Bible from the little table beside her, preparatory to taking her nightly dose of verses, "that Hessie consented so readily to go to this ball, and leave off her mourning on purpose."

"She must be very keen for it," said Bella, crossly.

"I think it a pity. She might have left you this one ball in peace. He will surely then show you what he means, one way or another. There will be the day after, too. Make the most of your opportunities, love."

"I don't mind a bit about Hessie," said Bella, with a toss of her head; "he does not care a button about her, that is very plain. You never see them together, as you see us."

"No, dear; but I have seen him amused by her old-fashioned ways, and even by her remarkably rude remarks. And, indeed," ruminated Mrs. Bruce, "I do not like his signing his note to her 'Douglas Arundel,' and ours, 'Leaholme.'"

"That is nothing," said Bella, snappishly.

"You must begin to think about your dress, Bella, dear," resumed her mother, more cheerfully, "and you and I will see about it as soon as to-morrow is over."

"What will Hester do about hers?" asked Bella, rousing herself a little.

"I dare say she will order it in Hereford, or perhaps when she goes to Birmingham: I do not know. She is quite old enough to arrange those things for herself. I shall, of course, give her any advice she may ask for, but I really do not feel called upon to take the whole responsibility. I shall do my

duty by her in every way, of course, but it really does not so much matter how she looks on this night; there will be plenty of balls to come for her. When you are married, I shall devote myself to her. I am tired of gayety for myself," continued Mrs. Bruce, opening her book with a sigh, "but I will do my duty as long as I have young people about me. How old is Hester now?"

This question was sudden and rather unexpected, inasmuch as she had found her place in St. Luke, and she could have seen no reminder of it there.

"How can I remember?" drawled Bella.

"I thought you might, dear. Well, I suppose she must have been twenty last birthday," cogitated Mrs. Bruce, who knew her age to the day. "There is plenty of time before her. I do not like early marriages, though I was barely seventeen when your dear papa won my consent to our immediate union. You must have the advantages where there are any to have, love. Not that being a year or two older makes any difference in appearance, but seniority gives its own peculiar privileges. Bella, how old is Lord Leaholme now? Here, take the book and see."

It was not the Book that was lying in abeyance on her knee, but its daily companion on the little ormolu table. And Bella, who had counted the earl's thirty-four years as often as she had counted her own twenty-six, opened it at the page to which it opened most easily, and read with a relish what she could just as readily have said blindfold.

"LEAHOLME, EARL OF.

"Douglas Arundel, Earle of Leaholme, Viscount Wye, and Baron Leaholme, of Leaholme, in the Peerage of Great Britain. Captain in the First Grenadier Guards. Born May 22d, 1835. Succeeded his cousin, Douglas Arundel, the sixth earl, March 12th, 1866."

She paused here, but her mother placidly begged her to go on, as she had got so far.

"Oh, never mind, mamma! We don't want to know when the first baronet was created, and all that sort of thing; and I cannot pronounce the Latin motto. You know there is nothing more but his town residence and seats; and we know those well enough—as far as it tells us here. Oh, dear, I *should* like to go to Leaholme Castle! I wonder when I shall!"

"Bella," said her mother, a few minutes afterward, "we will call on Mr. Delahoyde before we go to the abbey on the 6th. I should not like to have appeared neglectful."

"I went over the other day, and visited the schools while he was there," said Bella.

"That was a good plan," returned her mother, smiling—"an encouragement to Mr. Delahoyde; and I dare say he will tell——"

"When are we to make this call, then?" interrupted Bella.

"The day after Hessie goes will do. I wish Lord Leaholme had given that living to some one who belonged to the families we visit; or, at any rate, who knew them."

"It does not really signify," said Bella, impatiently and perversely; "when one asks the clergyman to one's house, his cloth is his guarantee of respectability. We need not mind anything else; and we need not take him to be a bosom friend. I do think it will be very awkward for—the Countess of Leaholme, because the earl *does* look upon him as a friend, I verily believe; and she never could, of course."

"Oh! she can do as she likes, you know, love."

"Well, good-night, mamma," laughed Bella, rising at last; "at least, good-morning, for it is Christmas-day. I wish you a merry one, and myself, too. I wish Lord Leaholme were here to be coming in as he did last year, and making it so jolly. I wonder what sort of a Christmas he is keeping at Leaholme?"

"Good-night, dear, a merry Christmas, too. It will soon be Twelfth-night, and you can ask him."

Bella shut the door and tripped into her own room; and Mrs. Bruce at last took up the open book; and, with a quiet satisfaction, read of One who, at that time, and for her sake, had become poor; that through his poverty she might be made rich. And she did not pause to question whether that meant that she might possess the fulfilled desires which surrounded her, or the luxuries in which she reveled.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN BIRMINGHAM.

ON the round table before the fire tea was laid on a spotless white cloth, where one straw mat stood empty, promising a little hot dish to come. The Venetian blind was down and

darkened on the solitary window, and the red curtains drawn half across from either side.

Aunt Phyllis felt herself growing a little sleepy, now that there was nothing left to do; but, avoiding, with praiseworthy forbearance, the two easy-chairs that stood at the fire, and selecting a very bleak and upright dining-chair, she struggled womanfully with temptation.

Still the sounds in the comparatively quiet Birmingham street *did* grow gradually distant—mellowed—silent—then a tall house fell bodily.

Aunt Phyllis started up to hear Mrs. Goldsmith's cheery voice telling her "to put the poker gently in."

"Good gracious, Mary! how did you burst open that door?" she exclaimed, unable to feel that the house was still safe at its foundations; but jumping down upon the hearth-rug in surprising wakefulness, for the gentle insertion of the poker. "Not but what I think it is a shame to spoil a good fire by poking it; so extravagant, too. But you must do as you like, I suppose; and a good fire *is* cheerful when one comes in from a cold cab. Where's Pollie?"

"Seeing about the fire in Miss Bruce's room. Annie lighted it and it went out. Poor Pollie is lighting it herself in despair."

"Dear, dear, how tiresome! And I know Anne will let that chicken burn, or not have it done, or something."

"I have just been looking at it myself, and it is getting on very well, Phyllis," said her plumper and more easy-tempered sister.

"How does my dress look, Mary?" asked Phyllis, standing up and shaking out her skirt. Pollie says there is quite a new gloss on it. That's the blessing of getting a thoroughly good silk when you buy one at all. I have had this now eleven years, you know, and it looks as good as new to-night—almost."

"And how many times have you turned it?"

"This is the fourth. My goodness! What's that?"

That was unmistakably a crash. But what occasioned it was the question needing solution, and both ladies went into the little kitchen to solve it.

"Oh, mamma," cried Pollie, meeting them at the door with tears in her voice, "Anne has broken the globe of the best lamp! What shall we do?"

"Oh, you careless, careless girl!" began Aunt Phyllis; but Mrs. Goldsmith only said two words, with a note of exclamation after them. "The best!"

"I didn't break it, like 'm," said Anne, penitently, "for it was cracked before."

"Of course it was," cried Aunt Phyllis, excitedly; "and when you cracked it—it was when the Earl of Leaholme and Mr. Delahoyde were here—you said you had not broken it, only cracked it. That's how you do all the time. First a thing is only cracked; then, when it comes to pieces, you didn't break it because it was cracked before. No, you never break anything, you careless, careless girl!"

"Well, Phyllis, it is no use crying over spilled milk, my dear," Mrs. Goldsmith interrupted; "the question is, how are we to manage?"

"Can we afford as pretty a one, mamma?" whispered Pollie.

"We must, dear."

"Then I will run and get it myself, for fear of another breakage. I shall not be a minute."

"But, my dear, suppose you are detained?"

"I cannot wait to suppose, mamma."

Before Mrs. Goldsmith imagined that Pollie could have reached the shop, she was back, almost as "outbreathed and worn" as Corinth's sons.

She went panting into the kitchen, lighted the lamp, and, putting the new globe on with pride, carried it into the dining-room, then ran up-stairs, and came down in a few minutes, bright, and fresh, and pretty, in the muslin dress she had adopted for evening wear during Hester's visit, with a large housekeeping apron of brown holland tied on over it.

"Now, Anne, go and put on your new cap," she said, taking the basting-spoon from Annie's hand, "and be sure to be ready when you hear the wheels stop."

But Anne knew quite well who would hear them first, and warn her in good time.

Then Pollie cut the toast, and put it all ready to be done at the last, embraced Roley, hovered about the dining-room table, thought the fire would have burned up exactly right, then fled up-stairs again to the best bedroom, from which Mrs. Goldsmith had been ejected into Aunt Phyllis's. Pollie hovered about every corner here, stirred the fire, smelled and touched the violets, which were a very small bunch indeed, but very sweet; smoothed the bed for the fortieth time, drew the small

white easy-chair in front of the fire for the forty-first, then fluttered down-stairs again and stood before the kitchen fire ruminating.

"Does the cap look well, 'm?"

"Very," replied Pollie, warmly, though she ought not to have done so, because it was her present. "Anne, try to get your work done each day as quietly and quickly as you can, will you?"

"Yes 'm," said Anne, growing more and more curious to see the honored guest.

"Now, mother, what are you thinking of so very busily?" Pollie, in her perpetual popping, had popped down on the hearth rug at her mother's feet.

"I was wishing, dear, that you had not so much to do yourself before being ready for your guest."

"But, mother, dear, I like it tremendously. My fingers would grow a burden to me if I might not use them."

"And I was thinking, too, dear," put in Aunt Phyllis, "that you ought to have some nice friends to take Miss Bruce to see, or to bring here to see her."

"I doubt whether HESSIE would care a bit for that," said Pollie, with a laugh.

"But it ought to be, if people behave as they should. We do not care for ourselves, but we care for you, dear."

"Do you think for a moment that I care?" asked Pollie, gaily.

"This life is dull and hard for you, my child," said her mother, tenderly; "you cannot help feeling sometimes, however much you hide it, that the proud indifference you meet with there, where it should not be so, is very hard to bear."

"Phyllis, my dear," interposed Pollie, addressing her little aunt with the familiarity she often adopted when they were alone, "what sort of notions have you two been gleaning while I have been away?"

"I think, Pollie," began Aunt Phyllis, plaintively, "that it is a shame to see the girls about here treating you as they do, simply because we do not give parties—stupid, stuck-up affairs theirs are, I know—and because you work for your livelihood."

"And a much more lively-hood it is than theirs," popped in Pollie, placidly.

"I think it is most wicked—worshiping in the same church,

too!" added the little lady, in an emphatically conclusive tone.

"Dear auntie," said Pollie, leaning her head against her mother's knees, "how does that verse go, which you must surely have forgotten to-night?"

"Think ye that sic as you and I,
Wha drudge and drive (walk, I mean) thro' wet and dry,
(Dry a good deal oftener than wet),

Wi' never-ceasing toil,
Think ye, are we less blest than they,
Wha scarcely tent us (I don't know what that means, on their way,
As hardly worth their while?"

We perfectly well know in our own minds that we *are* worth their while; and are, therefore, just as comfortable as if they knew it, too."

"I have made up my mind about one thing," said Mrs. Goldsmith, decisively. "You shall go to the concert on Saturday. However often Miss Bruce may have heard Sims Reeves, she is sure to enjoy him again."

"Oh, never mind, mother; the tickets are expensive, and I have no more money."

"But I intend to buy them. I shall write a line and secure two places."

"Suppose Miss Bruce is horrified at the thought of going to a concert without a gentleman," put in Aunt Phyllis.

"No fear," said Pollie, in sudden happiness; "but are you sure you can afford it, mamma?"

"Quite sure, dear. I will have my own way in that one thing."

"It will not interfere with our poor women, will it?"

"Certainly not. You know we have everything ready for them. I never fear missing what I spend on them. I opened at a pretty verse of Miss Proctor's to-day, Phyllis, as I cut your new book; did you notice it?"

"And the more thou spendest
From thy little store,
With a double bounty
God will give thee more."

"Ah!" said Aunt Phyllis, with a sigh, "that is so true—in some cases."

Laughing heartily, Pollie ran out again; stood a moment in the hall listening; picked up Roley and dropped him again, with a sudden catching of her breath, for a carriage

had stopped at the door. The big apron was thrown off, Anne was roused; the door was opened on Hester's cold, happy face, and she was greeted with warmth and love in the bright little home.

No one had time or leisure to notice that the chicken was tough; no one noticed in what a tremor Anne waited at table during tea; no one noticed how very round her eyes grew as she sat bolt-upright on a retired chair during prayers, making prolonged observation of the wonderfully pretty face by the fire.

The pleasant evening had passed, and Hester and Pollie sat at the cheerful fire in Hester's spotless little chamber.

"Pollie," said Hester, from her low arm-chair, "you will not be angry if I ask you something?"

"Well, dear," asked Pollie, blushing a little.

"I should be so glad not to have fires in my bedroom."

"I thought you would have been accustomed to them always," said Pollie, "else I—I never have them myself."

Without answering—because she could not have done so as she wished—Hester begged to be allowed to be without; the rooms got so hot, and the light kept her awake.

Both of which little harmless fictions Pollie took on credit, and promised she should have no more fires in her room.

"Hessie," she said, presently, "I have so many things to tell you. First of all, who do you think sent us a splendid Christmas hamper? I do believe it contained every Christmas luxury in the kingdom. Where do you think it came from?"

"The rectory at Ruyglen," returned Hester, unthinkingly. Pollie blushed crimson.

"Now, Hessie, how could that be? No; but from Leatholme Castle!"

"That is not very far from here, is it?" inquired Hester, absently breaking her rather long pause.

"No; about six or seven miles. But was not it wonderful? We shall never forget its arrival; the house was like a lunatic asylum all the evening. The earl would have been frightened that he had turned our brains, if he had seen us. Oh, was not it good of him?"

"He is good," was the quiet answer.

"Even you own it at last," laughed Pollie. "Do you remember that you never would say so in Aberswys? I sometimes think, Hessie, suppose I were to tell some of the girls

here, who hold their heads so far above me, that I had spent hours with the Earl of Leaholme, and that he had actually been here to tea. They would be so astonished, so jealous, and—so polite to me, I dare say.” And Pollie laughed merrily. “You see, Hessie, the Birmingham people think so much of him; he is their great—lion,” said Pollie, short of a word; “and Leaholme Castle is their——”

“Lion’s den?” asked Hester, with a funny little laugh, “or Eden, were you going to say?”

“I am not joking, Hessie, dear; if people——”

“Say if Birmingham altogether.”

“Well, if Birmingham knew I had you for a friend, and that you were a great friend of his, I should have invitations and attentions from all quarters.”

“Are you not glad they don’t know?”

“Yes. I do not want acquaintances.”

“Yet we must have them on our way through the world, Pollie, mustn’t we? We cannot take all we meet as friends. But now, Pollie, dear, please to tell me what you promised—the history of your New-year’s party. It is really to-morrow, is it?”

“Really,” said Pollie, laughing; “and you want its history to-night? Are you not tired, dear?”

“No, indeed.”

“Well, where shall I begin?”

“At the very beginning; at the preface, if there is one.”

And then Pollie began, looking into the fire, while Hester lay back looking into the fire, too, and thinking many things about this little loving home. “Once upon a Christmas-time, Hessie (to begin properly), my mother was preparing for her usual party. This was in the days before she took to wearing either caps or wrinkles, and I was not helping her, for the simple reason that the very possibility of my existence was a thing as yet undreamed of.

“This preparation for her Christmas party meant a good deal more than you, so uninitiated, can imagine. It meant bringing to light the hidden glory of the drawing-room furniture; it meant bringing forth the best china and glass from their stowage; it meant the setting forth of every object in its most propitious light; it meant laying in a supply of everything, and finding at the last moment that the very most important one of all had been forgotten; it meant a very strange amalgamation of odors all over the house; a strong objection

on the part of turkeys to brown delicately on the breast, and one or two blanc-manges turning out so obstinate that they refused to turn out at all; it meant a hot face, an anxious mind, and a constitution thoroughly devoid of appetite during the day.

"And though it meant, too, eventually, a pleasant evening, it was invariably followed by an inexplicable reaction, and the very unsoothing reflection, 'Now everything has to be put away again; and what good has it all done?'"

"On this once upon a time I mentioned, as my mother asked this unanswered question—not addressing any one in particular, because my father had been asleep from the first moment that such a proceeding had been feasible—she happened to take up an old book that lay upon her dressing-table: such an old, old book it was, that it seemed strange for any of its words to come before her now with a new light glimmering on their old familiarity.

"'But when thou makest a feast, call the poor; the maimed, the lame, the blind, and thou shalt be blest.'

"'And thou shalt be blest.' There was no vagueness about it; it was one of the clear and simple promises with which the Book abounded; and my mother never doubted but it would bring a feeling far preferable to the one which she was then experiencing.

"She closed the book tenderly, and through the rest of the winter night she made her plans.

"'James,' she began, next morning, dove-tailing this speech, with great adroitness to a pleasant repetition of those compliments of the preceding night which were dedicated to the master of the house, 'James, I want to give another party to-morrow.'

"My father's eyes opened to their widest, but he did not say much. Indeed, he could hardly have said less than his emphatic 'Oh!' though he prolonged that as much as his application to breakfast would allow.

"'Yes, James, if you consent,' she added, diplomatically.

"'And invite all the same people again?'"

"'No, none of them.'"

"'Then who on earth would you have?'"

"'I would have,' said mother, hiding her face behind the baby as she carried him to his father, crowing irresistibly (the baby was my brother Jim, who is in Australia now; and who, according to mamma, spent his infancy in crowing and

laughing)—‘I would have, dear, if you let me, “the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind.”’

“My father took the baby first and the idea afterward—much more slowly—and that morning the invitations were given.

“Strange to say, no excuses were offered—no refusals sent; and truly there was a novel gathering in the dining-room at home (our old home, I mean) on that New-year’s day just three-and-thirty years ago.

“There had been no difficulty in finding guests; the difficulty was in knowing who to leave out; for if there is a town in the kingdom in which there is a scarcity of poor, and maimed, and lame, and blind, it is not, at any rate, this town.

“Of course, it could not be supposed that there were no drawbacks to the success of this first experiment. Several things happened which dampened the pleasure, though they only caused laughter afterward. For instance, one or two of the poorest women, to whom fasting had become second nature, grew so obstreperous after the unaccustomed glass of gin and water with their supper, that they could hardly be prevailed upon to go away, and evinced a strong desire to embrace papa and mamma at parting; and when—seeing a couple of mothers, who had sat through the evening attached to their babies, grow weary—mamma and one of our maids took a child each with great hopefulness, it set up such a hullahbaloo (not on the present Hullah system at all) that the programme of the evening was very seriously interfered with. And at last, when the guests had each received some warm garment as a New-year’s gift and were going, it was found, on opening the front door, that one gallant old gentleman had come to escort his lame wife home, and had been overtaken on the threshold by exhaustion; for there he lay on the steps in a state of coma; and when the foremost drew back, he looked up and said, with a benignant expression, ‘I don’t care which of ye picks me up; not a bit.’ And they were all willing enough to do it, too, and took him quietly away among them.

“Yet taking it altogether—which must be the right way to take those things—the experiment *was* successful; and I believe mother did *not* feel afterward that the preparation and trouble had been wasted; even though she had felt at

the time that the entertaining was far more difficult to her than any entertaining ever had been before.

"Next year it was less difficult, and the next less so still; and I remember going about as a child among the oddly assorted guests, and thinking that, after all, they were as polite to each other, though not so polished, as amusing, and much more easily amused, than the guests who came to our Christmas party.

"But as the years passed on, and brought a sad change in our home, we were obliged to limit our invitations gradually. This was a great grief to us, for we clung faster and faster to the old custom, and loved better and better to give the one little gleam of unharassed pleasure which it was in our power to give, just once in the year, to those to whom the year was so long and so hard-working.

"After papa's death, in this small house to which we came, we used to take as much furniture as we could out of the little dining-room, and manage to arrange for, and receive those, whom we hope to have with us to the end. To-morrow we shall have only five; for we have not this year asked any strangers with the old friends who have met each other for so many years, though we looked forward to other meetings when the strangers shall grow into friends, too. The old set has been falling off rapidly. Two have died during the past year; three lie now in their last suffering; and one brave old woman of eighty summers (for why should we always count the backward years as winters, because the snows at last lie thick upon our heads?) has gone alone to the North of Ireland to see her dying son. So to-morrow we shall only be ten in all—mother, Aunt Phyllis, you and I, our servant (who is always mistress on these occasions, and assiduously waited on by me), and our five guests, to whose pleasure and enjoyment you will add so considerably, Hessie.

"We have had to deny ourselves many of the old pleasures we used to give them, and Jim's wife—before they went—even advised mother to give up her New-year's party altogether; but mother soon showed in her quiet way that *that* would be among the last acts of self-denial she should feel it necessary to perform; and I laughed at the notion of enjoying an extra dress or two, at the expense of losing this one pleasure and privilege.

"So I thought of a plan for managing the presents without missing the money. I got an unopenable money-box, and

whenever any of us had loose coppers or little sums we should not miss, I brought it out, and we deposited them therein; knowing it would mount up wonderfully before the time came. Mount up it did, too; so high at last that there was not room for another halfpenny, and we broke open the box, looking like burglars.

"It is astonishing," said mother, contemplatively, "how much it looks."

"It will be astonishing," said Aunt Phyllis, cautiously, "how much less it will look in silver."

"But the most-astonishing of all," I said, sweeping it into a plate, "is how little we miss it."

"This copper mine does not *quite* cover the expenses, but it goes far toward it. Farther than ever, this year, though we were rather extravagant in going to Aberswys for so long."

"I will not tell you any more, Hessie, as you will see for yourself, and I have made my story long enough for one night. Now tell me something."

"Only one thing, Pollie," said Hester, stooping to kiss the fire-lit face, with a strange tone of pain in her voice, "only this one thing: I am very glad I am here, in this happy home of yours; and I feel as if a new year, begun for me with such a loving, earnest greeting from you all, *must* be a—good one."

"Why don't you say a happy one, Hester?"

"Must not it be happy if it is good?" laughed Hester, gently.

And Pollie, though she looked quickly up into the beautiful young face above her, saw nothing of its deep-lying sorrow.

"Listen, Hessie! The old year is dead."

Hester rose eagerly and opened the window, and the two girls stood together for long minutes there, while the chimes from the town rose purely, gladly, brightly, on the midnight air.

"Now, Hessie dear," said Pollie, drawing her from the window, and closing it, then kissing her in the protecting, cherishing way of the old school-days, "it is quite time that you were asleep, for you have had a tiring journey to-day. Let us say good-night, and I will leave you to rest."

But when Pollie had left her, Hester sat down again before the fire, and fell into a long, long thought.

"This will never do for the beginning of a new, earnest year," she said at last, rousing herself suddenly; "perhaps if

"I write a little it will put the thought out of my head. It haunts me too much when I feel myself so listless, and find it so impossible to make myself forget myself, and—and when I see my face look odd and white as it does sometimes. What shall I write? Whatever it is, I hope that thought will not come creeping in."

But, though Hester said it, she knew, when she read the few simple verses she had written, that the haunting thought had spoken almost in a longing.

"LETTING IN THE NEW YEAR.

" 'Ever alone!' she murmured, sad and slowly;
 'Alone, alone, through all the weary years!
 I cannot read to-night the words of comfort,
 My eyes have grown so dim with constant tears,

" 'The Old Year, softly dying in the starshine,
 Has brought no ease to long and bitter pain.
 The New Year, creeping toward me from the future,
 Cannot restore the loved and lost again.'

" She raised her eyes—so heavy 'mid their weeping—
 With one long look into the starlit skies.
 Distant and slow the midnight bell was tolling,
 And sleep at last fell on the tired eyes.

" Now in her dream she stands beside the casement,
 And throws it open with an eager hand,
 As the New Year, borne on its joyous chiming,
 Flies with its gladd'ning promise through the land.

" Yes; she is there amid the old, dear faces;
 And loving hands are laid upon her own;
 Bright words of love and friendship, unforgotten,
 Are breathed once more in sweet, familiar tone.

* * * * *

" Ah! when they enter'd in the early morning,
 The heavenly sunshine crowned her sleeping head;
 Upon the open Book her hands lay gently;
 And, looking down, with tearful eyes they read—
 'And I will give you rest.' Oh, words of comfort!
 'She hath the best New-year of all,' they said."

CHAPTER XXX.

A NEW-YEAR'S PARTY.

IF Hester were glad, as she had said, to be among these warm, kind friends, they were equally glad to have her. The house seemed brighter and cheerier, they thought, than it had ever been, before the pretty, restless figure and sweet face came to move about it. She took her place at once with the ready grace and tact which she so pre-eminently possessed; and, by her quick sympathy and tenderness of hurting or neglecting, won every heart in the household.

Aunt Phyllis, even before the first twenty-four hours of her stay were over, began wondering what they should do without her. Mrs. Goldsmith's warm, motherly heart took her into its very deepest recess. As for Pollie, her quiet little face seemed brimming over with happiness, and Roley grew morbidly jealous.

The extraordinary preparations for the party elicited hearty laughter all over the house, and Hester's highly original designing and festooning were interrupted continually (especially the startling "Welcome!" to be suspended in the little hall) by a laughter and admiration which quite incapacitated Pollie.

At last the two girls looked round complacently to see everything ready. Hester stirred the fire to a brighter blaze; Pollie lighted the lamp. Hester said:

"Will it do now?"

And Pollie, in the same breath, said:

"Now it will do."

Then there was nothing more to be said or done until the guests arrived.

"Of course," said Pollie, "the first rap will announce two guests. I never remember a solitary one coming first, and I'm sure there is some understanding among them to this effect."

So they did. Two of them coming in—pattens, umbrellas, and all—like a genial breath of the wide, frosty world without, carrying, each one, a basket gingerly covered with a clean handkerchief, under which lay, in careful preservation, the cap. Sometimes so preserved from year to year, for Pollie

said she had known the same cap arrive so for nine years together, and not look seriously aged in the ninth.

Pre-eminently, the first great feature of every New-year's evening was the bringing to light of the cap. If it chanced to be a new one, the burden of hope and anxiety was too great to be calmly borne by the possessor, and her intensely conscious expression added tenfold to its striking appearance.

If the cap chanced to be an old one, or rather one from which the gloss of novelty had departed, there was a shade of pique discernible in the glance which the wearer would throw upon others of more recent date.

Old Mrs Choosan first began the disinterment of her cap on this night; slowly folding the red handkerchief which had served as an awning, that she might prolong the excitement of Pollie, who hovered over the basket, taking cautious peeps into the corners.

"Why. I declare, Choosan, it is a new one!" she exclaimed, with the utmost surprise, as it came forth; having read that fact long ago in Choosan's beaming face.

"'Tis a new 'un this time, Miss Mary," she answered, with an abortive attempt at *sang-froid*; "do you like it?"

Now, as all Choosan's caps had been made on the same principle for all the years Pollie had known her—viz., with two broad, oblong blocks of border, sticking well out with a solidity of their own, and forming a margin to each cheek, the back being a very secondary consideration, and not worthy of any amount of serious thought, Pollie had great difficulty in showing herself struck by its novelty. But she decided emphatically that it was becoming; and as Choosan knew this comprehended all that is desired in a cap, she glanced across rather pityingly at Mrs. Breeze—bright, beaming, rubicund Susan Breeze—whose basket was still uncovered under Hester's hand, and who declined to hear Choosan at all.

But her momentary cloud of jealousy turned to a perfect ripple of delight when, as the three-years-old cap was displayed, Hester exclaimed upon its brilliance.

"Do you know, miss," said Susan, pulling out the loops with ineffable tenderness, "it's a old cap!"

"Do you really mean it?" asked Hester, examining it with her head on one side. "Why, I quite fancied I could tell a new cap when I saw it."

"It does look a'most like a new cap, don't it, miss? But

my boy bought it me nigh four years ago, of his first wage."

It was on by this time, a perfect bower of roses round the honest, comely face; and these two guests were ushered in for Mrs. Goldsmith and Miss Robarts to entertain, while Pollie answered another rap. This was Molly Bent; her little, gentle, wrinkled face rosy as a winter apple, and the cap (from which her little flat gray curls peeped) of so substantial a nature that it bore the big black bonnet over it, and was quite fresh when that was taken off, with a broad black ribbon round it, as if Molly had felt the wind in her ears after she had put it on.

Good little Molly Bent! As rosy she was in face and in heart, as if she had not a poor old bedridden husband at home for whom she had toiled all day, and who never left off groaning and fretting from sunrise to sunset. As warm and genial as if she never sat over an empty grate, or got up in those bitter nights to give her thin, worn blanket to the poor old shivering man, who never shivered the less for this one only possible addition to his comfort—or rather subtraction from his discomfort. As cheerfully brisk and active as if the days were not long hours of hard, rough work, and the nights often longer hours of wakefulness and nursing. As brave and hopeful still as if her seventy years had taught her nothing but a sweet and glad content; a humble, patient resting on the love of Him who hath said, "Blessed be ye poor."

Following closely on the heels of little Molly came Martha Jones, with her bobbing courtesy, which made Hester fancy she had intended to "flop," like Mrs. Jerry Cruncher, and changed her mind suddenly; with her long black bonnet—the material in which, Pollie reckoned, would have made her and Hester eleven each—and with the long blue-cloth cloak which had been given her twenty years ago, and worn through every winter since, and the remembrance of which had shamed Aunt Phyllis that very autumn when she had begun to think she required a new water-proof.

In she came, in her pattens, clattering equally with them and her busy little tongue; deftly taking off her cloak and pattens with her left hand, as she had learned to do everything since her right had been cut off some few sad years before. A needle that had been left in a curtain she was washing had worked its way into her palm; and, after months of agony, as she told Hester that night, the Infirmary surgeon

had taken it carefully off, and it was better so, and she was growing "quite handy."

Of course, Martha's bonnet was a fixture. The extensive satin bow at the top proclaimed this at once; and Hester took her into the dining-room, while Pollie ushered in—last, but emphatically not least—Miss Jemima Kimble; tall, stately, deaf, and wavering in her mind.

Poor Miss Kimble was in what she called reduced circumstances; but if such a reduction extends to the valuation of one's self, it was a very doubtful one in her case. "She had seen so much better days," that, of course, that satisfactory thought effectually blinded her to the good of these.

No one knew what these better days of Jemima's had been; but the romance gave her such gloomy satisfaction, and elevated her so unquestionably in the eyes of herself, that no one disputed it. And the low-born neighbors (whose "better days," perhaps, were only to come!) kindly and gently bore her patronage—though they might laugh sometimes at the poor thing's eccentricities—and never hesitated to help her: never grumbled that her thanks were not forthcoming, though now and then one of them would give her a few sharp words. Many a time would little Molly, tired and aching in every limb, call in and do Miss Kimble's heavy work, while she lay in bed. And hearty, kindly Mrs. Breeze, on many a Sunday morning, would divide the little dinner at home; pretend to eat her share while the young mouths were busy, and the eager, loving eyes were watching her; then quietly slip her plate away, and take it in to poor Jemima, as "a little bit that was too much, that we put away for you to taste how you liked it cooked in this way."

Miss Kimble, having relinquished her shawl and bonnet, stood opposite the girls with folded arms; a very extraordinary figure, indeed; just the same width all the way down, and robed in a short, chintz muslin skirt of an uncertain age, and a long, tight, rusty alpaca jacket, edged with a limp tucker, which refused to stick up and conceal her long, thin neck. But the little yellow knot of hair on the top of her head, about the size of a crown (and here we would be understood to mean a five-shilling piece), though it looked so unnaturally lofty, was not an atom higher than were Pollie's and Hester's chignon.

"Come, Miss Kimble," shouted Pollie, as Jemima pulled

out and arranged the six short yellow curls which trembled on her temples, "they are only waiting for you."

And when she was shut in, the girls began to work in earnest.

"Mr. Delahoyde's curate said of Sir Randal Platt that he had 'rather a high complexion,' Pollie. I wonder what he would have called mine now?" laughed Hester; but she clung to the toasting-fork, while Pollie buttered the cakes as fast as they were ready.

The pyramids were piled, and in went the girls with the tea and the hot cakes, at sight of which Hester noticed the mouths water, and heard an expectant sniff from Miss Jemima.

But Hester—wide and quizzical as her eyes were that evening—saw nothing of the wonder and admiration caused by the attendance and attention of the beautiful lady who had such pleasant words to say to them all, and whose tiny white hands were so willing to wait on them.

If a smoking board means a table with hot dishes upon it (which very rarely *do* smoke), then it was round the smoking board that the five guests assembled, with Anne at their head, the ladies waiting to see them settled.

Hester saw Anne trying to put her mother (Mrs. Breeze) into the background, as if she felt the responsibility of her position; and saw, too, the perfect impossibility of success in the manoeuvre. Susan would crop up everywhere as the most prominent figure in the group. She saw poor old Jemima draw her easy-chair to the table, spread a large pocket-handkerchief on her highly developed chintz knee, and express, by an easy staff, that she had nothing to complain of, *so far*. Then Hester saw her obligingly help herself to muffin, regardless of Anne's pantomimic reminders of "grace before meat." Mrs. Goldsmith did not stand among her standing company, just at the crisis when the tea would be the hottest and strongest, and sing with them a verse of a hymn, long metre by nature, longer metre by suspension; but in half a dozen words she begged a blessing on them all, leaving the muffins out of the question; and when that was over, they sat down in quiet content, and Pollie shut the door gently upon them. Then the girls went back to the kitchen, and Mrs. Goldsmith and Aunt Phyllis rested in the drawing-room, where Roley sulked majestically on the rug, that being the warmest and most undisturbed spot he could select for the purpose.

Stopping in their talk, every now and then, to listen delightedly to the involuntary laughter or low chuckles that reached them from the next room, Pollie and Hester—toasting still—sat over the fire, discussing their guests. No need to tell how many times Pollie went in to replenish the plates, or Hester took in fresh supplies of tea. Suffice it to say, that when the meal was over and the guests had gathered round the fire again, Mrs. Choosan, who was more outspoken and independent than the others, confided to Hester that “it *was* a good tea, and so had ought to be; as it lasted them a whole year, and they’d never another like it.”

When the six chairs were comfortably arranged round the fire, and Anne was playing the hostess, and taking care of every one, Hester and Pollie carried their own tea into the drawing-room, much to Aunt Phyllis’s enjoyment; and there they all partook of it merrily, Hester balancing her saucer on her fingers in imitation of Choosan, and Pollie delightedly setting aside ceremony, and taking her tea to the rug.

“You are enjoying it so much, Pollie,” laughed her mother, “that I shall never get you back to your guests.”

“Come, Pollie,” said Hester, having finished her own tea, “your nose is growing brilliantly red, and will soon have an ‘incomprehensible sheen’ upon it, like Dickens’s Italian friend, if you stay there encouraging the warmth and somnolence of which that will be an emblem. Come.”

Then began the usual evening’s entertainment; and gay as the guests might have been while left alone, Hester noticed that they looked eagerly for the ladies to go back, and Choosan, as spokeswoman, welcomed them.

“Ah! we like it a deal better with ye among us; and I’ll let ye have your own chair, missis.”

But *missis* would not hear of this, and Choosan, no way unwilling, sat on; as easy as the chair itself, as much at home upon it as if they had grown old together.

Then Jemima rose majestically out of the other arm-chair, but still less would Mrs. Goldsmith take that, and she, too, slowly resumed her position, which was as stiff and upright a one as could well be imagined, and made Hester fancy the rusty jacket might be made of sheet-iron, and that the crisp curls might come off with any bend or jerk.

Martha sat herself down close to Hester, her head on one side like a little cock-sparrow’s, the big bow nodding at any pause in the conversation. Seeing this, Jemima nodded,

too; and, though they might not be at appropriate intervals, the nods were a decided improvement on the normal rigidity. Susan, still prominent, filled her position both practically and metaphorically to advantage; and, as the evening advanced, Hester fancied that the flowers in her cap literally expanded and opened on the genial soil. Quite in one corner, on the other side of Hester, placid and quiet, sat little Molly, her small thin hands folded in her lap, and her big cloth boots set in the first position below her short calico skirt.

So they sat, sometimes chatting in groups, sometimes talking altogether a little more earnestly, sometimes whispering a few serious, heart-felt words, sometimes sending a joke through the circle, and breaking into a hearty laugh, which might have been weak and uncalled-for in women whose lives had so much earnest in them and so little play, but which made the work no harder perhaps on the morrow, and certainly made the play more healthful for this one day.

Of course, the songs came in their course, the old, old songs, for it was very rarely, indeed, that a new one was attempted. Now and then it happened that an ambitious radical guest would volunteer a new song; and go swimmingly through the first and second verses—perhaps, indeed, the third—when symptoms of floundering became evident, and the faces of the company would grow anxious and concentrated, as they ransacked their memories or inventions for a next line. But to give the necessary impetus, it was advisable to go back to the very beginning of the song, so that the introductory stanzas were generally rendered as many times as there were guests, and grew painfully familiar to the audience. Still each one, with perhaps a faint exception, stopped at the original halting-place in the middle of the verse, the faint exception possibly passing that, and then floundering more hopelessly and irretrievably than all.

So the old songs still remained pre-eminent, though they never came spontaneously by any means. There was more pressing and persuading required than Hester had ever seen in any party before, and more coughing and clearing of the throat from each one than Mr. Leslie's choir ever indulged in as a body.

But they always came at last—the old songs which the singers pretended they could not sing; and the chorus, consisting of a repetition of the first verse at every pause, followed invariably.

Susan was, as usual, requested to begin, and (after some difficulty) induced to consent. Slowly plaiting her apron in her fingers, and gazing at one particular coal in the grate, she told (as it was her custom to tell them annually) how she and some one, who was never particularly mentioned, met—'twas in a crowd; how she lost her breath when his eyes were upon her; and how well aware she was of what he felt, by the effect on his deep-toned voice; ending each verse by energetically assuring the company that her mother was the cause of the anguish which did not appear to be affecting her in the slightest.

After various compliments and encouraging remarks, Martha was prevailed upon to sing her standard song; sorely against her principle, it would seem, while she had as little idea of going home without having sung it as she had of going without her supper. Hester listened with rapt attention:

“ ‘Ere’s the rock, the broo-oo-ook, the tree,
Ark! ark! a voice. Do you thi-i-ink ’tis ee?”

(Pause of several moments.)

“ ‘It is not tee, and the night is coming gon;
Oh, where’s my lovely wandreer gone?”

“ ‘It is not tee, and the night is coming gon;
Oh, where’s my lovely wandreer gone?
Oh, where’s my lovely wandreer gone?
Wandreer gone?
Dreer gone?”

This song was received, as usual, with hearty applause, and the above verse, which composed the chorus, was vociferously joined in. Then it was Jemima’s turn, and her song came without a descent from her elevated, stony attitude.

At first Hester thought the familiar words were set to a Gregorian chant; but, as it went on, she was obliged to own to herself that Gregorians were much more lively, and not one she had ever heard could have made such a sustained wail of the pathetic assertion that “*she* never bullamed him, ne-ev-ver; but received him when he came.”

Choosan and Molly declined to sing, and meant it. “It’s very well for thee as are singers,” Choosan said, “but I never found as I was, and I don’t intend to begin to be one now, in my years.”

So after this the turn came to the other side of the house, and Aunt Phyllis graciously accorded *her* standard song, “O

Nanny, wilt thou gang wi' me?" and won her standard laurels.

Then Pollie being called upon, blushed and laughed, and would not, having a strange feeling of shyness before Hester; though she only remembered the child's quick talent and intense love for music, and how she used to sing so purely about the rooms at Lorne House, shocking the elder girls with her daring light-heartedness. Hester seeing that, however laughable it might be, Pollie was thoroughly in earnest, left off persuading her, and agreed readily when the eager request was made (rather more humbly) to herself. She sung at once, with a piquancy which made them all laugh over the words, while they tried to keep a breathless silence, that they might not miss a single note. And as the refrain came again and again, the first note was greeted by a pleased little nod from each.

" 'For there's nae luck about the house,
There's nae luck at a';
There's little pleasure in the house,
When our gudeman's awa'.' "

And then, at their pleading request, she sung a quaint old Christmas carol, which charmed them all, especially Pollie.

After the songs, it was nearly time for Mrs. Goldsmith to read and pray with them, as she always did before supper; but just at this particular crisis there was heard a long, quiet knocking at the outer door, and Pollie, in her capacity of waitress, went to open it.

She seemed to be a long time away, while they were all wondering what the voices and steps outside could mean. When she opened the door at last, it was to announce, in a voice preternaturally grave, "Two late visitors."

If St. Simon Stylites, pillar and all, had suddenly walked into the midsts of these guests, they could not have been more taken by surprise than they were when they saw one of these visitors—the great earl, whom they all knew by sight, and whose beautiful castle they had seen on their rare holidays.

Hester's greeting was as gay as any one's: her reception of Hugh, perhaps, the most frank and genial of all; yet the one great throb her heart had given when she saw Lord Leatholme's face seemed to have killed the bright, new hope that had been struggling within her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SEPARATING.

THE Earl of Leaholme sat among Mrs. Goldsmith's guests, enjoying the fun; amusing the ladies of the house, and joking with the old women, but never arrogating to himself the conversation; on the contrary, as Hester noticed, simply helping it for the others. And then she felt as she had never felt before, what a true nobleman he was; not that she was thinking of his rank, but of that true nobility which teaches us to love as brethren, to be pitiful, and to be courteous. Mrs. Goldsmith, in placid enjoyment, folded her dimpled fingers, and put off her reading. Aunt Phyllis fluttered on her chair, and tittered irresistibly.

Hester, in the midst of her own talk, heard him drawing out Miss Jemima, asking her questions relevant and irrelevant, and telling her odds and ends of news that were emphatically *news* to her. This, of course, she could not help but overhear, in the raised voice which it was necessary to use in conveying anything verbal to Jemima; but she found herself listening, too, to Jemima's murmured confidences. She heard her tell him that this was the only house which she visited now, for she had no other friends. And when he asked her how that could be, she said the gentry held themselves above her, and so she would not thank them for their visits; that the clergy, if they did come, only came to chirp at her, and that she did not care about the commonalty. And—though Hester was not supposed to be listening—the laugh danced in her eyes.

She heard him (how quickly her ears would catch his voice!) asking Choosan of her family; and then she heard Choosan's confidences too; how that her husband was but "a poor old piece," and there was "forever and ever of trouble with him," and other things; how that she was getting too old for folks to give her much work, but that all the same she "couldn't sit down and klem;" how that she could make a very little do, providing she had a cup of tea and a clean cap; and that, altogether—though it *was* hard sometimes—plenty of others were worse off, and she "wasn't angry with the Lord Almighty!" Hester did not catch Leaholme's low answer; but she heard Choosan's ready, assenting reply:

"Yes, sir, God *is* good. Oh, yes, sir, I always feel—whatever happens—as He does His best."

Poor-Hester! The speech she had been making was stifled, and she tried in vain to regain her gravity. But Molly only thought she was laughing over her stories, and took it as a compliment rather than otherwise; and presently Molly, too, was talking cheerfully to the earl.

Mrs. Goldsmith rather shyly began to speak of prayers again, and requested Hugh to take her place. Then they all settled themselves in their seats with a rustle, as people do in church after finding the text. Then followed the hot supper, over which the five mouths watered lusciously, and on which whispered praises were lavishly bestowed.

The Christmas presents of new warm garments were given quietly, one at a time, in the kitchen, by Mrs. Goldsmith alone; then the hearty and heart-felt New-year's wishes were exchanged again, with a good deal of gratitude accompanying them. Pollie held the front door open, and Hester stood in the little hall, re-arranging some of the shawls with an eye to comfort, and finding umbrellas for the owners, and owners for the umbrellas.

The last good-night was said, and Pollie slipped into Choosan's hand, as she passed, a little parcel of cold beef for her sickly husband—"the poor old piece."

"It will be supper for him," said Pollie, almost apologetically, "but it is not much."

"Well, thank ye, miss," replied Choosan, politely, "it'll do."

Pollie, smiling at the reception of her little surreptitious present, watched her down the street, then turned to Hester with a funny little kiss.

Anne had made such good use of the last ten minutes that she was carrying the supper-tray in the drawing-room when the girls shut the outer doors. Pollie blushed a little as they followed it in—but, then, her blushes seemed to have it all their own way that night.

"May we stop to supper, Mrs. Goldsmith?" asked the earl, with great respect, just as Aunt Phyllis was thinking how stupid it was of Anne to bring it in before Lord Leaholme. "We are rather vagabondish to-night, and as Delahoyde is my guest over Sunday, I ought to try to promote his enjoyment. He has promised to preach at Leaholme in the morning, and perhaps will be careless if I do not oblige him by

asking you to let us stay. For myself, it will be an intense pleasure. For him—just look? Did you ever see so much suppressed anxiety in one human countenance before? Do let us stay.”

“Miss Roberts,” he said, as they drew up to the table, “was it not comical to notice how eagerly your guests pocketed the mince-pies to-night when Mrs. Goldsmith gave them permission? How easy to see that their hearts were with the hungry ones at home.”

“Do they ever attempt to do it without permission?” inquired Hugh.

“It has happened only two or three times. Only two or three times among as many as twenty guests at a time, for more than thirty years.”

Hugh looked a little incredulous. Clergyman though he was, there were some simple truths which he had yet to learn among the poor.

“It will be very pleasant always to remember these nights, Mrs. Goldsmith, I should think,” said Hester, her voice very thoughtful, while she raised her eyes, full of a quick, bright hope, to Mrs. Goldsmith’s face.

“Very,” she answered, with a smile, “even when the old faces have faded from our lives—as they will never do from our remembrance—or when our place here shall know us no more save in a few loving hearts. Then I trust that some one else will perfect what we have been attempting. Some one else will give a little time, a little trouble, and a great, great deal of pleasure, to those who have to bear the burden and heat of the day.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CONCERT.

THE music hall was crowding rapidly next night, when the cabman gave a quick, heavy rap at Mrs. Goldsmith’s door.

“Cab, please, ladies,” he said, rubbing his hands and shaking the snow from the sleeves of his white great-coat, as Anne opened the door and disclosed to him the group of ladies in the hall.

Hester, in her black-net dress and scarlet opera cloak, was stooping down, that Aunt Phyllis might adjust to her own

satisfaction the silver flagree comb which crowned the dainty little head; laughingly prolonging the process because Aunt Phyllis seemed to enjoy it.

Mrs. Goldsmith was giving her good-bye kiss to Pollie, who looked very pretty and young with the happy excitement on her face, though her high, white grenadine had seen its best days. At the cabby's summons there was a grand commotion. Anne ran down the steps, escorting each young lady separately to the cab, under an umbrella. Another good-night was called, and they were off—two of the brightest, happiest, least critical listeners whom Sims Reeves had that night.

When the concert was over, Pollie stood in her seat, letting the people flock past her. "If we wait for the crowd to disperse a little," she said, "it will be better. And yet if we do, Hessie, we shall perhaps lose our cab; the man promised to be there for us, but of course he will go if he gets hired. Oh, I hope he won't."

"Never mind, Pollie, if he does," said Hester, gazing about her and enjoying herself very much. "Don't be nervous. How beautiful it has been! I long to try whether I remember that one Italian air. Would the people stare if I sung it now?"

"Come," said Pollie, abstractedly. "Come, now, dear." With a rapid change in her lowered voice, Hester whispered, "Not yet—not just at this moment—please, Pollie."

Miss Goldsmith, turning to ask why, saw the Earl of Leatholme coming down the room in the crush, leading a resplendent old lady, and looking back just then to answer the remark of a young lady behind them. At that moment he saw the girls—he might have been looking at them all the evening, for any surprise there was in the recognition—and bowed low and pleasantly, while a few heads turned inquisitively to see whom he greeted. Then his party passed on, and the girls hesitated before following. But they need not have done so; the crowd shut them from each other as effectually as the walls of the hall could have done.

By dint of much patience and more perseverance, they steered their way to the door, and here was confusion and clatter, indeed, as the carriages rolled up.

"Whose carriage, ladies?" shouted a policeman, noticing Pollie's anxious look out into the street.

"Oh! it does not matter, thank you," stammered Pollie, feeling very much smaller than she need have done; "we only want our cab."

The man did not seem to think this quite such an important matter as others he had on hand.

"I'll hail it presently, miss," he said, shouting another name almost before the words were over.

"If I could see out there, I should recognize our cabby in a moment," said Hester, "and any man would fetch him."

"This is the worst of being alone," sighed Pollie; "is it not tiresome?"

"I like it," said Hester, merrily. "I think it fun to see the rush and crush."

"Do you, dear? It is only for you that I dislike it."

The crowd in front made way for a tall gentleman who came in from the snowy streets, the light flakes lying thick upon his opera-hat.

"Miss Goldsmith, do not you know that a carriage is waiting for you, and that others cannot come up until it has passed?"

"Oh, is it?" cried Pollie. "That's our cab. Oh, thank you, Lord Leaholme, thank you! We shall soon find it."

"It is first on the line, and the way is covered: you need not fear the snow."

She took the arm he offered, really too much bewildered to refuse, and Hester followed them through the crowd, thanking him in her heart for taking Pollie.

He handed Miss Goldsmith in; turned and helped Hester; closed the door rather hastily; raised his hat a moment, and they were off.

"Oh, Hessie!" began Pollie, in real alarm; but Hester laughed outright.

"What carriage is it, Pollie? It is very comfortable."

"Lord Leaholme's. How did he manage it?"

"I thought he had been beyond the portico, because of the snow on his hat. I see now that he had been to bring this up. We might have known by the servants."

"But he kept them out of sight. No one was at the door but himself."

"I would rather have had the cab," said Hester, with such sudden gravity that Pollie laughed.

The horses dashed along the quiet street, and were pulled up suddenly at Mrs. Goldsmith's door. Aunt Phyllis came

out with Anne to see what the unusual clattering might mean, and stood within the door gasping dangerously.

"Cinderella and one of her uncomfortable sisters, Miss Robarts," said Hester, shaking the snow-flakes from her hair on the steps; "and Cinderella objects to leaving her god-mother's chariot."

The cause of which little assertion was the long time Pollie took to perform the descent of the steps, guided and supported by the arm of an imposing footman.

How awkwardly during supper Pollie's description of her drive interfered with Hester's description of the singing, and the small snatches she gave of her favorite song! And how they would interrupt each other's tales, until Hester broke off suddenly, and sung a verse of Martha Jones's song from memory, chorus and all, giving it its true originality:

"'Ere's the rock, the broo-oo-ook, the tree,
Ark! Ark! a voice. Do you thi-i-ink 'tis ee?
It is not tee, and the night is coming gone,
Oh, where's my lovely wandreer gone?

It is not tee, and the night is coming gone,
Oh, where's my lovely wandreer gone?
Oh, where's my lovely wandreer gone?
Wandreer gone?
Dreer gone?"

And Pollie could tell nothing more for the peals of laughter, which drew abundant tears from Aunt Phyllis, who always laughed till, as she expressed it, "she cried again." Though why, when she had not cried before, she should call it crying again, no one quite knew.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"THE STERN TO-DAY."

"If you would not mind, Hessie," Pollie said, next morning, "we will call, on our way to church this afternoon, and see some of our New-year's guests."

And Hester consented very gladly.

Their first visit was to Miss Jemima Kimble, who was suffering from a complaint she called the Sinking, but which, in spite of its name, seemed to cause her to sit even more upright than ever. While they sat in the bare little room,

Susan Breeze brought in a mysterious concoction in a bowl, on the top of which reposed a slice of pallid pudding, dotted sparingly with little oases of raisins. Susan did not see the girls until the present was as good as given, else, judging by the bright, shamefaced blush of the giver, it would not have been presented. Then Jemima looked at it and put it aside. "I suppose you've tasted it yourself," she said; "you know whether it's good, without my opinion."

"I liked it very well," returned Susan, looking modestly conscious of her excellency in the culinary art, and forgetting to make herself heard.

"There wasn't much flavor in that tea you brought me last, Miss Goldsmith," said Jemima, turning to Pollie. "Hadn't you better tell your ma she'll get it better at Clay's? Johnson's never agrees with anybody—particularly with me."

"And we want a good cup of tea to cheer us this Christmas time, don't we?" said Pollie, kindly.

"Christmas or no Christmas, a bad cup of tea's always a bad thing," she answered, sententiously.

Poor Jemima. As the girls turned out of her small, bleak room with Susan, it seemed as if they were taking away from her the only Christmas that could ever reach her.

"We are pretty well used to her odd ways now, Hessie," said Pollie, quietly, "and know how little accountable she is for her ingratitude and discontent. And when I go from some small bright house, with its atmosphere of love and contentment, to her bare apartment, where the air is laden with complaint, I feel that she has brought her bitterest punishment upon herself. Yet who can tell, after all, what glimpses of good may not find their way into those long dreams which the poor creature must fall into, during the many hours she sits there alone, dependent for all she needs on the charity which angers her?"

"A cheerless hearth," said Hester, sadly; "and yet, would it count for less to our tender Father in Heaven than the loneliest little nest in the loneliest mountain tree in the world? And that we *know* He guards."

But Pollie, glancing into Susan's face, and thinking of the dinner in the basin, began to regret Jemima's ingratitude.

"Miss Mary," said Susan, her kind eyes growing a little moist, "maybe it's only the blessin' of our 'omes as makes us different. We might all of us be like that, if we'd lived

for thirty years our lone life; doubly lone, because deafness is so lonesome."

"But it is not always so; not even often, Susan."

"When I looked at her this mornin' in her des'late room," Susan went on, "and knew she 'adn't broke her fast all day, and 'adn't sperit to tidy up a bit and make it look like Sunday; and when I saw the gay big parties coming 'ome from church to their plentiful 'ot dinners, and when I thought, too, of all awaitin' me at 'ome, I was a'most too 'shamed to give her the bit I took; for surely, I thought, there's some-thin' a deal better as I ought to tell her of and can't worth more than meat to the poor soul that's gone so far in poverty that she can't digest the bit she gets. It's just starvin' in mind and body as she is, Miss Mary."

"But she hardly ever lets me read to her, Susan; she often tells me to stop. And she refused an alms-house, you know."

"Likely enough, miss; but maybe her poor mind is more empty and wrong than we know, and she's but all the more to be pitied for that temper. Cheeriness greatly 'elps us when we're poor."

As they walked quietly together, Hester's thoughts ran on from Susan's words to the music of the Sunday bells, and softened all her feelings for poor Jemima. There was the home offered to every one; to herself it had been offered all her life, year after year, and she had turned from it coldly, and indifferently, as Jemima had turned from this offered home of hers. So, was she to wonder and blame her, Hester thought, she who knew that a Father's hand had prepared a place for her, which she was making no effort to win, from which she kept so far, in unheeding coldness?

Having a little present for Susan's lame boy, the girls went in with her to her warm, crowded kitchen, where every one was digesting the wonderful weekly pudding, and where Susan's husband, with a baby on each knee, was smoking what he called "a quiet pipe;" while Hester curiously wondered, if *this* were a quiet one, what a noisy one could be.

He turned to Susan after the greeting with a queer, almost crying look on his hard, brown face. Like Peter Bell, "he had a hardness in his cheek;" but he had not the hardness of eye of that estimable peasant.

“ You’ve done it ag’in, Sue,” he began, “ and you promised to eat it all.”

She laid her hand lightly, with a quieting touch, upon his arm.

“ I’d enough. Trust me for takin’ enough.”

“ I wouldn’t trust ye no further nor I could see ye. If you’d take it out fust, I wouldn’t mind, Sue. Cut it out of everybody’s dinner, and the old girl’s welcome to it. But when ye take it from yer own, ’tis a different thing en-tirely; and I won’t have it, my girl, so long as I’m maister here.”

“ That’ll be a long time,” she said, smiling at his man-like rebuke, “ and all that time you’ll be the very one to want the poor thing to have a bit of somethin’ on a Sunday, that’ll do her instead of all these things that make you and me so ’appy.”

Pollie began to talk to Breeze of his first two grand-children, whom he was nursing.

“ Their father gets but little work yet, poor lad,” he said, “ and Sue would have us take to these a bit; and very putty little comfits they are in th’ ’ouse, too.”

Breeze did not intend to represent them as sweet-meats, Hester fancied, but as small comforts; yet it required an imagination more lively even than hers to picture any comfort these two atoms could bring into that overflowing household.

“ He’s as fond of ’em, Miss Bruce,” said Susan, glancing admiringly at the three, “ as if he’d never nursed eleven of ’is own.”

“ It is curious,” murmured Breeze, with deep reflection, “ as we never get tired of ’em, the more we have.”

When Pollie and Hester left *that* house, they certainly did not feel as if they took the Christmas with them.

No, truly. With its wealth of love—real brotherly love—of pity, of the charity that seeketh not her own, they left it there, in the wee, bright house, where ten hungry people lived on ten shillings a week, and one was lame, and could not stir from his little bed in the corner of the kitchen; and one was an imbecile old man who had come, ten years before to lodge with them, and had not been able to pay his few pence of weekly rent for four of those years, yet who would live on with them so until, at God’s touch, there should be light, and the poor dim spirit should perhaps know all that

had been done for it, and be another testimony, even there, to the wisdom of One who hath chosen the poor in this world, rich in faith.

After service Molly and Choosan were called upon; then the girls walked slowly and lovingly home along the frosty, quiet streets, thinking it might be a long, long while before they could spend another Sunday happily together, as they were spending this one which was so nearly over.

They entered the warm little drawing-room, expecting to find the two old ladies shaking off, with supernatural liveliness, all traces of the forty winks which usually—and especially on a Sunday—visited them in the gloaming, for they had been home from church more than an hour; but instead of this, they found them very wide awake, entertaining Lord Leaholme and Mr. Delahoyde.

“We are leaving so early in the morning,” said Leaholme, as he shook hands with Pollie, “that we ventured to disturb you to-day, and Mrs. Goldsmith has invited Delahoyde to tea; she did not mention me.”

Hester was greeting Hugh, and looking into his laughing face. She noticed the change in him. He had lost the worn, desponding look which had clouded his eyes, and he was, as she afterward remarked to Pollie with a shade of hyperbole, half as broad again at least.

Pollie had by this time merrily arranged the matter of the invitation, and went away to order and superintend the preparations for tea. Hester hesitated, not liking to follow immediately.

“We are late, are we not, Mrs. Goldsmith?” she said, glancing at the time-piece; and, in her new nervousness, not quite knowing what to say.

“We did not expect you before, dear, knowing you were calling on our New-year’s guests.”

“How was Mrs. Choosan?” asked Leaholme, easily.

“Enjoying pleasant reminiscences of the party, only she says she laughed so much that her eyes *swole*. Mr. Delahoyde, take care! Is it not a warning to you?”

“Had she any of her usual requests to make?” asked Mrs. Goldsmith, looking as serious as she could.

“Wants! oh, no, she never mentioned one,” replied Hester, looking seriously back at her; “but a strange dream has been visiting her. She dreamed that Pollie and I took her a new

cloak. Being superstitious, this has taken a great hold upon—us all three.”

“Very curious,” said the earl, with comical deliberation, as he half sat upon the table looking at her.

She was leaning against the chimney-piece, as pretty and graceful a figure as eyes could rest upon. Her beautiful hair was all put neatly up to-day, below the small black velvet bonnet, which had not a vestige of white or color about it, and which seemed wonderfully pretty to Hugh and the earl, contrasted with the lofty fabrics which their eyes had been perpetually encountering during the day. Her cold cheeks were bright with a soft pink flush, and her eyes flashed brilliantly with a strange hope and excitement which no one understood.

“Do *your* dreams ever come true, Mr. Delahoyde?”

She turned to ask it, as she left the room, in a bright, laughing voice. Leaholme, with a smile, half sad, half satirical, listened while Hugh answered.

“Mine never do,” she laughed, as he opened the door for her, and then she ran up-stairs.

Throwing her walking things upon the bed, she fell upon her knees for a few silent moments. No words came to her lips, but she rose quite still and calm, no shadow then of disappointment on the bright face.

“Mrs. Goldsmith,” she said, as she sat at table, “we went to see Miss Jemima, you know, and you never asked after her.”

“Pray, how is she?”

“Not at all well. She is suffering from the Sinking, a most painful complaint, from all accounts, for she says it werrits her even to see the mice running past her by the wall.”

“Oh, Hessie, do hush!” cried Pollie, putting down the teapot in despair.

“The door seemed barred when we got there, Miss Roberts,” resumed Hester, with deep gravity, “and we could not force an entrance at first. I was just going to cry, ‘*Liberte, Egalitie, Fraternite,*’ and Pollie was just going to run away, when—with one renewed effort—we pushed a great mat away from the inside, and burst in on Jemima. The mat was put there, she told us, because at the bottom of the door there was a gap that oughtn’t to be there, for she never *had* liked

draughts coming straight upon her ankles. Indeed, where she sat her ankles were always between two draughts, and she did *not* like it; though doctors *did* tell you always to keep your feet cold and your head as hot as possible. Mr. Delahoyde, when you have resumed a befitting gravity, I will trouble you to pass my cup. What do you think Choosan's husband told us?"

"Oh, do hush, Hessie!" pleaded Pollie, again; "I cannot pour out the tea if you make me laugh so."

"He told us, Mrs. Goldsmith, that his wife sent him in to Miss Kimble's yesterday with 'a few broth;' and he was to tell her Mrs. Choosan was very sorry she could not manage to take it in herself, and 'hot it up' for her. And that Jemima said to him the broth would do very well without Mrs. Choosan, for David had said quite true that a dinner of herbs was better than a brawling woman."

"Poor quiet old Choosan, fancy her being a brawling woman."

"Pollie did so laugh!" continued Hester, seriously.

"And no one else, I presume?" asked Leaholme, the question only an excuse for turning to look into her face.

"Who else would be likely to follow so bad an example, my lord?"

"I did not think about the *following*. I was afraid Miss Goldsmith had the bad example set her."

"Miss Robarts, my narratives have not met with the applause they merited," said Hester, raising her eyebrows comically. "I shall tell no more."

After tea, before the two old ladies had left the dining-room, Hugh tempted Pollie to the piano to sing a hymn he had heard for the first time in church that day. And then Hester found that she and Lord Leaholme were left sitting together at the fire, his chair drawn very near to hers. Her heart beat painfully; and when he read this in her drooping face, he interpreted it wrongly.

The silence must be broken, she thought, or her heart-beats would be heard.

"That is a beautiful hymn," she said, feeling that she had not a grain of sense at command.

"Yes," he answered, not troubling himself to hide his own abstraction.

"Do you play much now?"

The words were no sooner spoken than she regretted the "now;" but it was too late to correct the speech.

"No; none at all."

"Why?"

"I hardly know; but do you remember what Job said of his organ?"

"No."

"That it was 'turned into the voice of them that weep!'"

"Oh, yes, I remember, but——"

"But what?" he asked, gently.

"Job was such a miserable man."

"Just then, you mean. Yes; our miseries, I suppose, ought to sink into nothing beside his. They must have been great indeed," he added, with an odd, sullen laugh, "to have silenced those three self-sufficient discomforters of his for seven days and seven nights. Do you ever picture it?"

"No," said Hester, softly; "it is too sad a picture."

He laughed again. "You do not care to picture sad scenes, when there is no occasion."

"No. I wish I had no sad scenes to look back upon through all my life."

"'All my life.' It sounds as if you could look back upon your three-score years and ten. You do not 'count time by heart-throbs' yet, I hope."

"Yes," she said, looking up, quickly, "I was thinking of that only this morning—how really and truly 'We live in deeds, not years; in thoughts, not breaths.'"

"Were you? Why?"

"I suppose because I caught myself looking back regretfully, and looking on unhopefully."

"What did you regret?"

"I regret many things," she said, in a low voice, thinking of her one mistake, "but particularly one resolution I made four years ago."

His face saddened pitifully, for how was he to guess what this could mean, when it was years before he had ever seen her? He looked away again slowly, the one flickering hope dead.

"I thought that thought in church," she said, simply.

"I am afraid it distracted me from the service."

"I wish," he said, gently, "that you had no sad thoughts to distract you from anything so comforting."

"Was it comforting?"

"Delahoyde said so. As for myself, I was—do you remember, 'Barbara?'"

"Yes; I think I do."

"Well, I felt so to-day.

"Amid the words of mercy,
Falling on my soul like balms;
'Mong the gorgeous storms of music,
In the mellow organ calms,
'Mong the upward streaming prayers,
And the rich and solemn psalms,
I stood heedless.
My heart was elsewhere
While the organ filled the air,
And the priest with outspread hands
Blessed the people with a prayer.'"

"I wonder why his thoughts were elsewhere," said Hester. "Was Barbara dead?"

"There can be hopelessness without death. Can there not, Miss Hessie?"

The words seemed quivering on her lips which would have brought the sudden happiness to his face, when Pollie's voice broke in upon them.

"Hessie, would you sing Mr. Delahoyde 'Holiest, breathe an evening blessing?'"

She rose, crushing back the pain at her heart, and began to sing the hymn, sweetly and purely, while no note out of tune told of the struggle within. But presently the rich, sweet voice began to tremble, the words grew less distinct, and at last they stopped altogether.

"Do you forget it, dear?" asked Pollie, wonderingly.

"No," said Hester, without turning her face toward them, "and yet I cannot sing it."

"Are you not well? is anything the matter?" asked Pollie, in loving fear, bending to look into the little white face.

"I think, Pollie," she said, with a quick, wonderful effort, a real laugh chasing from her pained face the look of agony which none of them understood—"I think, Pollie, that I am going to be initiated into Miss Jemima's affliction. I begin to think I have the Sinking."

Before the laugh had died away, the guests began to say good-night; and Hester stood listening while Lord Leaholme begged Mrs. Goldsmith to go and see him at Leaholme Castle when he returned. Might he send a carriage over for the three ladies? he asked, as it did nothing but literally rust to

death. Mrs. Goldsmith thanked him quietly, as she shook hands, but thanked him heartily, for she knew that this was no artificial invitation, to be conveniently forgotten, but one which he earnestly wished them to accept.

Anne opened the door, letting in a bitter gust of the raw night wind.

"Oh, dear, dear!" shuddered Aunt Phyllis, "what a night this is to be out in!"

"'All aloud the wind doth blow,' indeed," laughed Hugh, going back to shake hands with Pollie in suspicious forgetfulness.

"How unusually red and raw poor Marian's nose would have been to-night!" laughed Leaholme, too, pulling up the collar of his fur-lined coat. "Delahoyde, what do you mean by bringing us both into Shakespeare on a Sunday night? Good-bye, Miss Bruce."

She was the last to whom he gave his hand, and she hardly felt Hugh's afterward.

"You look very tired, dear," said Pollie, putting her arms around the slight figure still near the door. "Come in now. You shall do nothing more to-day but sit in that easy-chair."

No! What was there more to do to-day? Let it drift away and lie forgotten, like those other happy, hopeless days which had brought her all this misery. Let it be buried quickly now, that it might not shadow her future, and embitter more the bitter past.

Suddenly, with a quick pain, Hester roused herself, for Aunt Phyllis was reading aloud from the new book which had been Pollie's Christmas box to her, and the words stung the poor child reproachfully:

" 'The Past and the Future are nothing,
In the face of the stern To-day.' "

Hester sat up on her chair, her hands clasped in her lap.

"Mrs. Goldsmith," she said, with a bright blush, "may I play to you, as you said you liked it?"

For that was the only way poor little Hester could think of, just then, to begin to act upon the lesson, and to win a little smile from the face of the stern To-day.

Quite early on Monday morning Tom appeared in his character of escort for Hester, and, rather to her surprise, he hastened her away.

"Why did you do it, Tom?" she asked, a little severely, as the train bore them—only too rapidly, she thought—toward Churleigh.

"I really did not hasten you, dear."

"You did, and they would all have seen it if I had not manœuvred and acted all kinds of things. You need not shorten my time where I have been so happy."

"Have you, Hessie? Happier than at home? I have missed you so awfully, especially before Sir Randal Platt came."

"Is *he* at Churleigh?" she asked, her voice very blank.

"Yes; he came on Saturday, and is going to stay over the ball at Wye Abbey."

"Why?"

"He seemed to wish it awfully, and mother had *carte-blanche* to take any guests we had. So he got me to write to Leaholme to ask if he would be welcome."

"And what did Lord Leaholme say to that coolness?"

"He said he hoped I would take any companion I might choose."

"He did not say *friend*, I know," remarked Hester, hotly.

"No: but why should he not?"

"Because he thinks still too highly of you, Tom, to call Sir Randal Platt your friend."

"Nonsense, dear. Sir Randal is a capital fellow."

"I dare say. I do not know exactly what capital fellows are."

"Well, you can judge of him, now that he is staying in the house. I like him a good deal better than I did, Hessie dear."

"I am very, very sorry to hear that."

"But really, he makes himself very pleasant, and one cannot help liking him. You wait and see."

"I will, indeed."

"Only if you *do* grow fond of him, I shall not feel quite in the same way. Is there any chance of it?"

She turned to look from the window, with a flash of scorn in her eyes which rather pleased Tom.

"I am *so* glad to have you again, dear. Churleigh is so different without you. I felt as if I were always looking for you."

"Did you, Tom?"

"Yes, always; but I feel all right and happy now."

"Thank you."

There was no scorn in that answer, and it pleased Tom still more.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BALL AT WYE ABBEY.

TWELFTH-NIGHT—the night anticipated by so many in Herefordshire—had arrived; and the little time-piece in Bella Lane's room was striking the half-hour after nine when Bella turned slowly from the glass, hearing Hester enter.

A thorough contrast the two girls were at all times; to-night that contrast seemed stronger than usual, as they stood a minute scrutinizing each other unconsciously.

Bella had been regarding a very gay little image two minutes before, and had experienced excessive satisfaction in doing so. The glass was fortunately behind her now, so she could not see how the prettiness of her little plump figure dwindled beside the brilliant, girlish beauty of her cousin. Yet Bella looked very well to-night, as she had imagined. The light wavy chignon at the top of her head was clasped by a drooping half-wreath of scarlet geranium and jasmine; the rich white silk skirt lay on the ground a yard behind her, having an aerial, illusive garment over it like a frilled veil. Over that, a short skirt of scarlet and gold tissue was looped up with spray of the geranium and jasmine. The body of the dress—a very trifle in point of size—was heavy with trimming of scarlet and white; and Bella's plump little arms and neck were loaded with gold. She looked happy and animated, and her color had not yet risen unbecomingly! Hester glanced at her in pleased admiration.

"Hester, how do I look?"

"Very pretty," Hester answered, frankly and heartily.

"I think it is a most handsome dress," said Bella, looking down complacently, "and if papa says it is too gay, as he delights in doing, his vexation will not last above a few minutes. Lord Leaholme admires this sort of a dress."

"Does he?"

"Yes; he would call it graceful. He says a lady cannot be more than graceful within and without."

"No, I suppose she cannot."

"I feel as if I should enjoy myself so tremendously. Hessie, you ought to have rubbed up your dancing. Do you think you can venture without?" asked Bella, giving Hester her cloak to hold.

"I fancy it will come back to me," said Hetty, laughing, "on the wings of the music, probably."

"I suppose you have never been to a regular ball in your life?"

"Never," said Hester, putting Bella's cloak carefully under the hanging flowers, "hardly to even an irregular one."

"You will feel very awkward, I fear."

"Why should I? Do you generally?"

"No; but I am accustomed to them."

"Oh!"

Hester's face was full of fun. She was so glad and bright to-night. So expectant of a happiness which she felt sure was coming!

Bella, turning again, began to take a sudden interest in Hester's appearance.

"Just take off your cloak a minute. Good gracious! Do you mean to say you are going without an atom of color?"

"Unless my nose is red," said Hester, turning laughingly for inspection.

"It is very silly; because you are not a girl of seventeen making her first appearance."

"Not at all. I am quite an elderly person; still I would rather wear no color to-night. But I have not asked your question yet. How do I look?"

"Too white, I think; but don't heed *my* opinion."

The soft flush that mounted to the wistful face contradicted that opinion as no words could have done, if Hester had tried words; she merely wondered vaguely why she was so easily subdued by Bella.

"Do you want to look at yourself?" inquired Bella, coldly.

"Yes, of course," she replied, the more readily, seeing that Bella did not expect it.

She met her own reflection merrily, though her eyes grew a little grave as she looked. She saw a glistening white dress, and a beautiful white lily above it; her mother's diamonds flashing purely and restlessly; and a pair of big dark eyes almost as restless at that moment, with all their deep, deep longing look. And she saw nothing more. Nothing of the perfection of the slight, graceful figure which lent the gleam-

ing dress its charm. Nothing of the wealth of the rich brown hair in which the one pure, spotless lily rested. Nothing of the dimpled whiteness of the beautiful neck and arms on which glittered those few precious diamonds kept from her mother's store. She saw nothing of the "tender grace" and quiet elegance of the face and form which the glass gave back to her; and she turned round with a slight sigh, and put on her cloak again.

"Now, Bella, let us go. Uncle Alf is sure to be waiting. Ah! Wattie, are you come for us?"

"Yes," said the child, looking wonderingly from one to the other, "the carriage is waiting. Oh! you *do* look so——"

"So what?" asked Bella, quickly.

"So grand, don't we?" laughed Hester, as she stooped impatiently, and kissed the quizzical little face

Wattie laughed.

"I never saw you look this way before."

"Nor I," answered Hester, gayly; "and I feel exactly like the little old egg-woman, Wattie—I verily believe that 'this is none of I.' Come."

Bella hastened through the hall into the carriage, folding her rich skirts around her. Mr. Bruce turned, with his eyebrows raised.

"And this is you, is it, Hessie? Is the dress a triumph?"

"I will tell you in confidence when I come home, uncle."

"Will two hundred pounds pay for it?"

"Give it me, Uncle Alf, and let me try. Oh, do!"

"Silly child! Jump in."

Mrs. Bruce was last to appear, slow and elegant in blue velvet and abundant lace. Tom and Sir Randal Platt had driven off before in the brougham.

Mrs. Bruce, very talkative and pleasant, began to discuss with Bella who would be at the Abbey; how they would look; and various subjects connected with a ball in anticipation. Neither Hester nor her uncle could keep up with them; but for them, too, it was a pleasant, cheerful drive.

Just within the door at Wye Abbey stood Tom and Sir Randal waiting. Sir Randal held back with a motive of his own, but failed; for Tom took his place at once at Hester's side, and common politeness bid Sir Randal advance to Bella. But he did not attempt to hide his dissatisfied frown.

"Hessie, be kind to me to-night," whispered Tom. "Dare I ask for the first dance?"

They were standing in a crowd of fresh arrivals, and she answered carelessly, as she looked about her:

"You must judge for yourself, Tom, whether you dare. If you do, I shall say yes."

He murmured his thanks as they walked through the reception-rooms, Hester feeling herself in a perfectly dazzling dream of flowers, and statues, and beauty, and music.

"How magnificent it is!" she said, breathlessly. "What a number of happy people!"

"Plenty of heart-aches too, I dare say."

"If you are cynical, Tom, please to go."

"I am not going to spoil your pleasure, Hessie."

"I do not think you could."

"No, I am sure I could not; you look so very happy. But I mean I am not going to think about—things."

"You prefer thinking about people for the time being."

"Plural if you must, singular if you please, Hessie. I shall not have you much to-night, I feel sure, dear," he said, dropping his voice still lower; "but, however much you are sought for, you will be gentle to Leaholme in his own house, won't you? You will not defy him, dear, as you always do?"

She laughed lightly, but her hand tightened on his arm.

"Tom, my innocent, kind-hearted cousin, do you suppose that the pleasure of your host to-night could possibly be marred by anything I could do or say?"

"I am sure it could, dear."

"But you can make mistakes sometimes."

"Of course there are plenty of bewitching people here to-night, but even our host will have leisure to remark a certain little winning face, I know. Why, Hessie," he went on, still looking down, "actually blushing rosily at that?"

"You say foolish things, which you ought not to say," she answered quickly, as she withdrew her eyes from the figure she had been watching.

"There *is* the host," said Tom, pleased at the unusual reception he imagined his words to have met with. "What a splendid-looking fellow he is, Hessie! You dislike him so much yourself that I can afford to praise him, you see."

Sir Randal and Bella were before them at the entrance to the ball-room; and while the earl stood talking with them, Hester saw him turn to a young man who stood near—a handsome, rather weak-looking young man, with faultless

light whiskers, an equally faultless black suit, and nothing else in the slightest degree worthy of remark.

"Mr. Hemming, Miss Lane; but I fear you are too late, Hemming, and that Sir Randal Platt has engaged Miss Lane for this dance."

"No, not for this one," confessed Bella, tartly.

Sir Randal resigned her with a pretense of disappointment, and turned at once to look for Hester. Bella bowed to Mr. Hemming, and they went off together.

The earl sauntered on speaking to every one; when he came up to Tom and Hester, they were standing a little apart, waiting for the crowd to advance.

"Miss Bruce, how do you do? You are engaged, I presume, for the opening dance?"

"Yes," replied Hester, giving him her hand.

"I feared so."

"Why?" asked Tom, simply, while her heart beat.

"I was about to ask a favor for a young friend of mine. Perhaps for some future dance he may hope."

"Oh, Hessie, Hessie!" she thought, crushing her flowers in her passionate handling, "you must have been mad to think such a thought as you did when he began to speak, and madder still to tremble so. Even Bella had sense enough to know he could not ask her yet. And for *you* to think so!"

"Tom, I am very glad to see you here. I need not say I hope it will be pleasant to you."

Tom smiled down at Hester for his only answer, and Leacholme's eyes followed his, with a moment's contraction of the brows. Then he smiled in satirical amusement.

"I am afraid my friends stand but a poor chance. You will let me know when you begin to tire of each other?"

All the longing of those past months, all the yearning love and humility of Hester's heart, seemed crushed in that one hot moment, when she heard his words, and looked up to read his cool, proud face. Her eyes glanced up straight into his, with a defiance stronger and prouder than the defiance of old, because it had lost its old excuse.

"Thank you, my lord. I shall be sure to tell you when I am tired of Mr. Lane. It is just the kind of thing I naturally should tell you."

Misunderstanding the struggle in her face, he answered, with a quietness which exasperated her still more:

"I begin to think I presumed an impossibility. Then, until I hear otherwise, I can—as your host—feel comfortable in the assurance that you are happily occupied."

Hester went through the quadrille mechanically. When it was over, she hardly noticed who begged for the honor and happiness of the next.

So it went on, dance after dance, and all the time her little embossed and perfumed programme lay untouched where she had placed it in the sash of her dress. She would not own, even to herself, why she allowed no one to write upon it.

Partners flocked around her eagerly. The best partners in the room she chose from, carelessly, almost saucily, but with such an evident indifference, now and then showing such a sudden glimpse of weariness, that they could not feel flattered by her choice, though they so eagerly sued for it.

The list of dances was nearly half performed when Tom came up to her, as he had come continually before, and found her at last disengaged.

Sir Randal was entreating for a promenade after their valse, but she moved her hand willingly to Tom's arm.

"I may venture now for a royal favor, may I?" he asked, fondly.

"Yes; and let us walk for a few minutes."

"You must own, now, that I was right," said Tom, laughingly, as they left the crowd behind them.

"Of course you were, Tom."

"Do you know what I mean?"

"You mean, haven't I always found you a reliable authority on all points?"

"In return for that," said Tom, laughing, "I shall tell you the remark everybody is making."

"Not everybody making the same remark, I hope? How dull it must be!"

"Not dull to me, for I love the subject of it."

"I love no one subject, Tom. I love many," she answered, in the same absent tone.

"Then you have your wish, dear; for all say you are the queen to-night; all the gentlemen, I mean. It is a good thing that Bella has Mr. Hemming's attentions to amuse her, or she would be green and yellow with jealousy."

He broke off with a low whistle, as Bella and Mr. Hemming came up.

"Is not this a magnificent ball?" asked Bella, smiling up at Tom in her proud excitement. "Have you seen Lydia lately?"

"Yes; she is over there, dancing away; and, I say, Bella, where did she get the brush this season? She has it suspended from her chignon; a very fine one. I should never have fancied Lydia one to be in at the death."

"She looks very nice to-night," said Hester, pressing Tom's arm, reprovingly. "I saw her dancing with Earl Leaholme, and I thought how well she looked."

Bella laughed—a sharp little laugh which brought no spontaneous answering one, as some laughs will.

"Poor dear Lydia! Lord Leaholme is always so kind to her. Mr. Hemming, I must introduce you, and you will be kind to her, I know. Oh, I am very fond of Lydia, shy and awkward as she is. If you are really fond of a person, you *are* fond of her, whether she is clumsy or not, are not you, Mr. Hemming? Do you think we had better pass on? Hester, you seem determined to make the most of your first ball."

"Bella!"—her mother was loitering carelessly and gracefully by her, whispering with her fan before her lips—"dance quietly, my love, you flush so soon!"

Tom and Hester had strolled back with Bella, and were at the lower end of the ball-room now, in the outer circle of the crowd. Suddenly a light, familiar tone struck upon Hester's ear, and made her pulses quicken.

"Yes; I will allow it, if you like."

"Oh, you condescend so far, do you?" a strange voice answered. "At any rate, it is a face that haunts one, be it with one beauty or many. Is she niece, then, to Bruce of Churleigh?"

"Yes."

"And engaged to young Lane, I suppose?"

"She was when she came here to-night—for the first dance."

"Why on earth, Leaholme," was the laughing rejoinder, "do you not seek for a dance yourself with the beauty of the evening?"

"My dear fellow, in my own house I wish every one to enjoy himself."

Hester's ear detected nothing artificial in the light, gay voice; detected no pain beneath the plain, straightforward

words; nor their real meaning in his desire to leave her to enjoy herself, free from any annoyance from him.

The eager, laughing words of the multitude went on around her, and the music rose and fell upon the flower-perfumed air. Hester remembered Tom's cynicisms. "Plenty of heart-aches, I dare say," and thought was *this* what she had come to learn—this realization of those bitterest, dreariest fancies, which had for a time vanished in the anticipation of this night?

He had indeed, then, learned to despise her, if the pleasure of this day would be interfered with for him, if he once danced with her.

"Ah, me! for the bright dreams of only yesterday—the yesterday which was so hopelessly passed; between which and this night there lay a gulf of certainty now!

"Hessie," asked Tom, rather suddenly, as they reached the high conservatories where she had been just once before, "Hessie, did it ever strike you that Leaholme was fond of Bella?"

She could not answer just at first, though she tried hard to do so; and Tom looked down surprised.

"What a thoughtful little face for such a scene! Are you tired, dear?"

"No. What did you ask me? Oh, I remember. Yes, it strikes me so to-night—I think. It used to strike me often, long ago."

"I used to think so, too, but never shall after to-night. I used to hope it, too, not to speak of Bella's own hopes; but I feel sure now that I have been mistaken."

"Why? He was dancing with her a little time ago."

"That had nothing to do with it," said Tom's superior wisdom. "He introduced her, and her only, to young Hemming; and he took care to tell her, in a way anybody could understand, though it sounded flippant, that he was the kindest-hearted millionaire in England, and seeking sadly for a pretty little wife. He throws, or rather brings them together, most scientifically, and shows off Bella at her best, as he can when he chooses. Now do you, for a moment, imagine he would do all that if he were in love with her?"

"No—I suppose not."

"I don't believe Bella is one of the fretting sort," resumed Tom; "but she certainly has been aiming at Leaholme; and this will be a blow to her if his previous indifference has not

been. Hemming wanted to be introduced to you, Hessie," he continued, when she did not answer, "but Leaholme coolly declined to see it. Have you danced with his lordship yet?"

"No."

"He is so different from any of us, you see, dear; he has an onerous part of his own to play. You excuse him, do not you?"

"Yes, I can do that easily. Now, Tom, listen. If you will leave me here among the flowers in quietness, while you dance with any partner you may choose to select—who accepts you—I will promise you the next dance. Will you?"

"Do you really promise it?"

"Really."

"But some one will find you. Platt is safe to do so."

"You shall find me, Tom; no one else."

"Thank you, dear. I will go if you really mean it."

For long minutes Hester stood with her back to the glass, though there were luxurious seats around her, and books and birds, which would have attracted her irresistibly at other times; and, gazing down the brilliant lines of colors with wide, yearning eyes, watched and waited.

And amidst all the bitter thoughts that crowded the beautiful little head, the bitterest was that she deserved this pain, and that the cruel treatment she felt she was receiving was only what she ought to expect; that it was only natural for him to treat her so, when she had shown this same scorn to him day after day, week after week, month after month, while he had been trying in all courtesy and kindness—ay, and in deep, unselfish love—to gild and beautify for her her solitary life.

"I never deserved it," the longing heart cried out in its anguish, as she covered her face with her hands, humble and penitent; "but, oh, if he would speak to me just once more!"

The distant music floated softly up the leafy avenue, but no one came.

Hester closed her hot, eager eyes, and turned her face to darkness. Then—some one was coming.

Bella, laughing and talking on Mr. Hemming's arm.

"Hessie, is it you? What a doleful face! Are you doing penance here alone?"

"Yes," said Hester, with a sudden, proud unconcern, and without turning.

"Are you to be left till called for, my dear?" inquired Bella, showing off patronizingly.

But Hester did not care for that.

"Yes," she said, "I am left for a little rest—till called for by your brother."

"Mr. Hemming will seek Tom, I am sure, if I ask him."

Mr. Hemming eagerly consented.

"Thank you," said Hester, quietly, "I would rather wait."

And as she said it, some one else came up—too late now—walking proud and erect among his flowers, straight to Bella.

"Miss Lane, the present diversion is supper. Hemming, I hope you are not above such sublunary amusements."

"I boast a favored lot," said Mr. Hemming, laughing, as he turned with Bella, "and do not envy you your duty among the matrons."

As they passed, the earl spoke to Hester, with a little bow.

"I have left behind me several anxious hearts looking for you, Miss Bruce."

Her lips trembled with the effort she made to smile; but as she glanced into his calm face, suddenly his own scornful words came back to her, and in a moment she was strangely at her ease.

"I am glad you left the anxious hearts behind you, my lord."

"Yes; you would not have me bring you one, as I well know. Why are you alone?"

"I am waiting for Tom."

"Poor Tom, he is worth waiting for, too. Here he is. Lane," he went on, in his easiest tones, "mind you are not called out for this unlawful monopoly."

And while Tom laughed, he turned away and left them.

The rest of that night was like a dream to Hester, whenever she cared, or could bear to recall it.

She seemed the gayest of all the guests when Tom proudly took her in to supper; and whatever group it was in which she paused, *that* seemed the brightest in the room; and when the crowd flocked back into the ball-room, she laughed, and danced, and talked, as if she knew no such thing as disappointment or weariness.

A stately duchess, with three eligible daughters, tried once or twice to awe her into inanity; but with her little head thrown back, seeing nothing of the effort, she talked on in

her bright, sweet voice, gently and merrily, and with a touch of something the listeners could not understand—a something that was called by many names that night.

Dance after dance went on, and between them all, the gentlemen clustered around her, eagerly awaiting the choice of the girl whose whim dispensed with a programme.

She could almost have laughed as she watched their open, harmless rivalry, at least of all but one. This one was Sir Randal Platt. He hovered about her, so enthralled that he would dance with no one else, and stood watching her, when he was not beside her, in a perfect trance of admiration, regardless of any astonished eyes that might be upon him. He did not care now to hide his infatuation; to him there seemed only one person in all that dazzling crowd. But though her reckless, gay excitement passed with him, as it did with others, simply for youthful, light-hearted enjoyment, his looks were neither open nor harmless when she turned with more willingness to others.

The strangest feeling to Hester herself was the impossibility of being surprised at her own strange power. It seemed quite natural to see the little crowd waiting round her. She seemed to know quite well, and to exult in the knowledge, that she could fascinate them at her will. She knew that she was pre-eminently dazzling among the hundreds there, and it was so easy to eclipse them to-night—so natural, so irresistible! She never thought why this was so, never wondered whether it had been so before. This was a night apart from all her life; and this girl, whose slightest glance and lightest word were prized most highly, was something, too, apart from her own self.

But all the wrong thoughts that rushed through her mind that night were buried under a long, long sorrow and regret, before she could recall them without a burning shame.

Her eyes flashed brilliantly at the remarks she could not help but overhear as she passed: and once, when she met suddenly, in a mirrored wall, the proud, bright face, with its new expression and the unfamiliar dress, she drew in her breath wonderingly, and asked her partner:

“Who is that?”

It was a joke against her through the night.

The morning was far advanced, and she stood a minute resting against the velvet hangings, when Lord Leaholme

came up to her, and in a low voice asked her to dance with him.

"Then," she thought, bitterly, "when the ball was over!" She shook her head carelessly.

"Engaged for this, my lord, and for the next, and for—oh! I don't know how many deep."

"Not too deep to fathom, Miss Bruce, if you allow me to look at your programme."

"Impossible, my lord; it is a sealed mystery."

His voice had an angry tremble in it.

"Is it usual for a young lady to decline so unceremoniously?"

"Perhaps not. Is custom arbitrary here?"

"Unfortunately she has not been so to-night."

She had noticed the stern, proud mouth, but had looked away too hastily to note the tender questioning in his eyes.

"Shall we dance together—once?"

"Why?" she asked, with the utmost nonchalance.

"The world is looking on, Miss Bruce. Why should I not dance with the—with an old acquaintance?"

"Because, my lord, we are here for enjoyment," she said, echoing his own cruel words; never reading, in his surprised, hurt glance, that he did not recognize them.

"And you think that I, at any rate, on this night ought to endeavor to contribute to that of my guests? How may I contribute to yours—by leaving you?"

He looked eagerly at her as he asked the question, but she only laughed.

"My imagination, in her wildest flight, cannot grasp the possibility of a minnow dismissing a Triton."

"You do not readily forget, Miss Bruce."

She answered, very quietly, "I remember well; perhaps against my will."

"All you remember from that source must be against your will, as I am well aware," he said, a little sadly. "Will you dance with me? Hundreds of eyes are watching us."

"And I ought to have a fellow-feeling for these many minnows. Would it cause confusion in the watery element if I declined your gracious offer?"

"I do not find the element very watery here, Miss Bruce. Come, we will discuss that another time, if you like."

"This valse must be nearly over," she said, lazily; "is it?"

"I fancy so; but of course I asked you for the next."

"I will finish this one with you," she went on, coolly. "You ask me at the end of the evening; I accept at the end of the dance. That is but just."

He bit his lip; checking a quick reply, he put his arm around her. They did not speak, but Hester felt a strange, happy dreaminess steal over her in their silence. And she danced with him for the first time in her life, and that unexplained shadow lay between them. And now the many eyes that looked on saw nothing but the two best dancers in the room, gliding silently on the current of "Frühlingslieder."

It had lasted but a few minutes for them, when the band ceased playing.

"Is this to be all?" he asked, bending his handsome face to hers, with a strange unrest in his eyes.

"Yes, this is all," she answered, half dreamily.

"Hessie, what spell is upon you?"

"Spell!" she echoed, carelessly, burying her nose and lips in her fading bouquet, while she struggled with the longing which was upon her to ask him for his forgiveness, while he stood beside her then as he might never stand again; to ask him just to say he pardoned her; just to speak one word in pity, because he never more could speak one word of love.

"Let me see your programme," he said, quietly. "I should like to put my name there, though ours was only half a dance."

"I enjoyed it," she said, raising her head again lightly. "You waltz very well."

"What a mockery your words are, Miss Bruce. How cleverly you hate! Yet 'tis a difficult art to study. Does your perfect practice repay you?"

"You have repaid me to-night, a hundred-fold," she answered, slowly.

"I? Do let me understand you," he entreated, in a low, eager voice.

But she turned away her head, for Tom had come up to claim her.

"I cannot dance any more, Tom," she said; "I have not sat down all night."

"But you told me it did not fatigue you."

"I would rather not dance again," she said, very softly, the color rising slowly in her cheeks.

"I asked you for your programme, Miss Bruce," said Leatholme, holding out his hand.

Tom looked surprised to see her give it to him without a word, and smiled as the earl gazed astonished at the blank spaces.

"Why is this?"

Hester could not equivocate. "I did not care to have them," she answered, quietly; "because I knew I should not afterward recognize one name from another; but I had another reason, too."

"May I write mine?"

"If you please."

He put his initials, and gave her back the list.

"Now burn it at your pleasure. Lane, I am going back to my duties," he added, as she replaced it. "I wear my fetters as jocosely as possible."

"Do you wish us to believe you have any?" asked Tom.

He looked at them both a moment rather oddly.

"I have read," he said, with a dry little laugh, "of a certain something which 'works like madness in the brain.' I always believe what I find in a book."

Before he was out of sight Hester's eyes had filled with sudden tears, for she knew what he had left unsaid. And through their blinding mist she watched him as he went about among his guests; just his own self still, she thought, knowing nothing of these burning thoughts which seemed to break her heart to-night whenever she allowed herself to think.

Tom talked on blithely and cheerfully; more so than she had ever heard him, but at first she hardly noticed it.

"Bella and Hemming are getting on famously," he laughed; "I think he could bear an addition of sense and animation without being inconveniently overburdened; but perhaps it is all the better for Bella as it is, because he will think as much of her as she does of herself. They were discussing you a little time ago, Hessie, and it was great fun to hear him put down by Leaholme, especially after Leaholme's singular kindness to him all night. Bella asked him what he thought of—oh, you would be so angry if I told you."

Hester looked up into Tom's face with sudden comprehension, and there all doubt was at an end. The old fault again; the Christmas resolution broken so soon—broken for not the first or even second time, only she did not know it!

That it was so now, she saw only too plainly, though his step hardly faltered, and he spoke to those he passed just as the thorough gentleman they thought him.

"Let me tell you, Hessie; you won't be angry, will you?"

"I do not care in the slightest."

"She asked him what he thought of her—her—sister-in-law elect! Poor Hemming did not know what to say, wishing to please her, but Leaholme put him down splendidly. Shall I tell you how?"

"No, Tom."

"Hessie," he asked, slowly, "how can you resist the lion of the room?"

With a hot, sharp sensation in her eyes, Hester spoke nervously, hardly knowing what she said; "Are you the lion of the room, you tawny fellow?"

"Poor Leaholme! how you do despise him! And yet, Hessie, they say no girl before ever resisted him."

"Perhaps no girl—before—ever tried," she said, as if to herself.

"Shall we go back, dear?"

"Not quite yet."

And though Tom was well pleased to wander with her, and held his head high to think how favored he was; smiling placidly, when at last Sir Randal Platt, tired of waiting, followed and joined them; still he would not, perhaps, have felt so complacent had he known how, with no pleasure to herself, she was keeping him there for his own sake.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"THE VOICE OF THEM THAT WEEP."

THE ball was over, and those guests who were staying at the abbey, before separating for the few hours that would intervene before daylight, lingered, idly chatting among the broken flowers and torn fragments of finery.

Even in the warm, well-shuttered room they could hear, in the pauses of conversation, the sharp, swift, wind-beaten rain without.

Hester had drawn her uncle a little apart, to prevent any one overhearing his joking congratulations, when Lord Leaholme came up to them.

"We have had a most capital party," said Mr. Bruce, cheerily. "I wish to congratulate you, Leaholme, on such a successful Twelfth-night."

Leaholme shook his head with a laugh. "Thank you, Bruce. At any rate, it makes me proud and happy to hear that it has been enjoyed."

Hester, leaning on her uncle's arm with both hands, looked into the earl's face with her brows knit, and a question came from her, involuntarily, almost unconsciously. "Then, why do you not *look* proud and happy, my lord?"

"I was trying to remember how another Twelfth-night ended," he said, quietly: "Perhaps the rain put it into my head."

"How was it?"

"A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain.
But that's all one, our play is done,
For the rain it raineth every day."

"Misquoted," laughed Mr. Bruce. "The right last line is more suited to you now, Leaholme."

"I do not think it rains every day," said Hester, pleasantly. "Surely it is enough for us to believe Uncle Alf's American friend, and own that 'Into each life *some* rain must fall.'"

He smiled at her, as he held out his hand for her good-night, but before she could say it Sir Randal Platt was at her elbow.

"I do not think the rain is indispensable," he said, with a bland smile, "in such a life, for instance, as your own, Miss Bruce."

"What a heavy, dusty highway lies before me, then!" she answered, determined not to let any words of his provoke her.

"Sir Randal will, perhaps, allow you a few April showers, my dear," said Mr. Bruce.

"A soft, bright, sunny shower," he returned, in a low voice, bending his flushed face to hers. "Nothing else upon your sweet, smooth way, Miss Bruce."

"She is not to know that course, then, that never *does* run smooth!" said her uncle, laughing.

Sir Randal began to answer, but stammered and failed; not because other ears could hear besides hers—such slight considerations as those were all overlooked in his eager desire to win this girl, on whom he had set his heart—but because her face had grown suddenly so cold and proud, and her parting bow so unmistakable.

On the stairs Tom ran up to her and seized her hand to stop her. "Hessie, dear," he said, in a low, hurried voice, "I have told Leaholme; and he says I must not think any more about it. He says he guessed, and should have asked me, only he hoped I should tell without. He will arrange it all, he says. You know what I mean?"

"Yes."

The cold, sad voice and face sobered Tom's excitement a little.

"Are you not glad for me, dear, to have lost this haunting incubus?"

"Yes. Good-night. You will not sit up longer, Tom?"

"No; but I thought you would be more pleased than this. I am so very, very glad myself."

With a hot, giddy feeling of shame for Tom—all the greater because he did not seem to feel it for himself—she stole into her own room, and, before she rang, knelt long in prayer for him and for herself.

The rain continued through the next morning, so the guests grouped off and played innumerable games, with the most cheerful alacrity; games ranging from billiards to battledoor; the elder and lazier ones talking, reading, and lounging in the stately rooms until luncheon-time, when the weather brightened, and they drove, and rode, and walked in the grounds. Then came the long, late dinner—longer and later than was ever dinner before, it seemed to Hester, on one side of whom Sir Randal had planted himself with admirable diplomacy.

Then came the inevitable variety of after-dinner occupations—a lounging chat, a glimpse of love-making, a dash of quick flirtation, a few innocent little wiles, all thrown away on some bright, particular object; the planting of a grain or two of scandal, which might or might not grow into a tree, in the branches of which would lodge only those birds of the air which carry the matter; a desultory general conversation, a plea for music, with the attendant asking and refusing, delaying and entreating, hesitating and complying, fluttering and complimenting, a touch of Mendelssohn, Claribel's latest ballad, and a florid remembrance of Verdi. All these came in due course; but to these were added to-night, gayer, noisier, more Christmas-like amusements; charades, of course, taking their own particular place.

"What gentleman will choose the first party?" asked Lea-

holme, who seemed to be everywhere, doing everything, and promoting the enjoyment of every one.

The choice fell to Sir Randal; no one exactly knew how or why; and he chose Hester unhesitatingly. He did not seem to care who else composed his party, so that they went out with rather an inefficient staff. Perhaps that was what he intended, as he proposed to take all the prominent parts with Hester, who did not relish the idea at all, and devoted her time behind the scenes in coaching Lydia and the other girls. But when she did act, she did it, as it seemed, with her whole heart in the part she played, enjoying it with her old childish freshness and enjoyment.

And she made her impromptu costumes so laughable for herself and so pretty for the others; threw such fun and originality into her impromptu speeches; made such piquant repartees, and so cleverly managed that the other girls (not at all against their wills) should take the love passages, and she be reserved for elderly or odd characters; that that, aided by Sir Randal's cool, skillful and professional acting, amused the audience intensely. And when, for the finale, they acted one immortal scene in Peggotty's kitchen, Hester's representation of Mrs. Gummidge—so ludicrous in its incongruity, and so exquisitely performed—made the lookers-on laugh till they were tired. The few distinct involuntary bursts in the room, so hearty and irrepressible, moved some of the actors, too, to involuntary and only half-hidden laughter, but Mrs. Gummidge never relaxed a muscle of her lone, lorn visage.

Leaholme had laughed and clapped most merrily of all, but he never congratulated Hester on her return. On the contrary, he said, as he passed out in Mr. Hemming's party:

"Your glory shall be extinguished shortly, Miss Bruce, in a greater. Try to bear it as well as you can."

If he saw the faces in the room while he acted, he must have been satisfied at having achieved the greater glory. Hester hid hers, ashamed of her spontaneous laughter, and the fascination she felt to watch his every look.

Was it possible that the wretched, gray-bearded old miser—counting his gold with a greedy smile, puckering up his eyelids as he examined each coin in the light of a flaring candle—could be Lord Leaholme, who had just passed her with those confident, merry words? Ah! was that he, too—that extraordinary female in a gorgeous satin dress, the train of which just escaped the ground; and a little bonnet tied be-

hind, where a piece of mechanism was fixed on the curly hair to represent a chignon; and in front of which remarkable bonnet a little veil just reached to the thick, dark mustache? When the gigantic lady sat down, spread her handkerchief upon her knee, and began sipping tea with a relish, and talking witty scandal with another relish, Hester wondered whether that face behind the little veil could be really the face which had bent above her on the tower on her last visit to Wye. Again her eyes were to be astonished. In he came once more, a poor, trembling, shivering sportsman—beside whom Mr. Winkle would have looked valiant—a stooping creature, with his hat at the back of his shaking head; looking round in apparent fear of seeing a bird, and, when he did see one, flying behind his gamekeeper, and grazing the unfortunate man's heels with the muzzle of his gun. Sir Randal could get no word from Hester throughout the charade. If he managed to make her hear him, she only turned her head from the stage one moment, her eyes full of laughter.

They were not perfect charades, by any means, but they were emphatically improvised, and so their prettiness and the comicality were both touching and laughable.

"Well?" Leaholme said, hesitating a moment beside Hester, after the word had been guessed.

"Well," she repeated, the laughter still in her eyes, "you evidently feel satisfied about the greater glory."

"Yes, you have no idea how easily you have taught me to act."

"Thank you for giving me the credit of your success," she answered, demurely. "You thought I acted well, else you would not have tried to eclipse me. Am I to give you, in return, credit for that?"

"Not at all," he said, with a laugh. "It comes by nature to women. They practice so much behind the scenes."

"Yes," said Hester, slowly, "and then behind the scenes regret the part they performed so easily before them."

"You have never done that," put in Sir Randal. "You have done nothing that could have been bettered, and so have no cause for regret."

Hester laughed rather bitterly, for the earl had turned to some one else now; and she was very tired of Sir Randal's contracted remarks.

After this the young people began to dance; but through it

all Lord Leaholme never came near Hester, but for a password when, as she fancied, he could not avoid it.

At last they all trooped off to their rooms, little caring, perhaps, for the quiet time to think whether one good or earnest thing had been done, or said, or thought that day.

In the early afternoon of the morrow, the guests stood out upon the wide stone steps at the great entrance, while the carriages drew up that were to take them away.

Hester leaned against one of the pillars, listening to the merry peal of the Ruyglen bells, and watching Tom as he arranged a little bouquet for his button-hole puzzling curiously over the glad, unencumbered face he wore.

She had avoided any quiet talk with him since he had said those few words to her after the ball, fearing he should tell her more of their interview, and she should have deep cause for shame. The change upon his boyish face said enough.

Presently her eyes came back suddenly to the group near her, and her heart gave a quick beat as she met Lord Leaholme's eyes fixed intently on her face. She began to speak, hurriedly and nervously.

"Lord Leaholme, why do you put the bells to ring for our departure?"

"Do they not chime in with your mood, Miss Bruce?"

"I think it is really too bad, do not you, Mr. Hemming?" said Bella, playfully taking up the idea, "too bad to make our going a matter of rejoicing?"

"Indeed it is, Miss Lane, and does not chime in with *my* mood at all," he replied, impressively.

"Delahoyde has been performing a marriage, I suppose, Leaholme," observed Mr. Bruce.

"Yes, that is a marriage-bell ringing for a very worthy pair. I told them they should have an encouraging peal, for they are marrying on little else. The brides who go from Wye shall go with music in their ears."

"And what about the brides who come to Wye?"

"They shall—oh, for them the bells shall ring till night fall; and 'tis the heartiest peal in Herefordshire."

"A rather romantic idea of yours, is it not, my lord?" asked Hemming, with a look for which Hester could have annihilated him. "Does it improve your people?"

"Hemming," answered the earl, with an amused smile, "no insinuations, if you please. We are a free and enlightened people. Why should you hint of improvement for us?"

"Will posterity trace this? to the bells"

"That depends—on who writes their biography."

"I acknowledge the freedom and enlightenment *here*," said Mr. Bruce, "and only hope it will *extend* upon the bells. They are supposed to ring out, or in, a good many things, are they not, Leaholme?"

"Yes," he answered, thoughtfully, "and I would indeed, if I could, 'ring in the nobler modes of life, with sweeter manners'—that is all; as a statesman, I respect the laws. Miss Bruce, you are frowning at that. What would you ring in?"

He had not lowered his voice, so she would not. She looked at him with a smile which hid the trembling of her lips.

"I would, I think, 'ring out the hundred wars of old, ring in the thousand years of peace.'"

"A clashing, smashing peal that would be," said Tom, gayly, as they took their places in the two carriages. And then they drove away, listening still to the merry chime.

"Hessie," whispered Tom, as the boys rushed to her in the hall at home, and Sir Randal assisted Mrs. Bruce, "come here a moment."

She followed him until he stopped at her own bedroom door.

"I promised to give this into your own hand, dear, here at home. Don't look so frightened; it is but a note from Leaholme. Take it."

Hester took it, nearly dropping it from her cold, shaking hand; made some commonplace remark to Tom; turned to the children, who had followed them, and told them she would come down to them presently; then she went into her own room and locked the door, that she might read his words alone.

They were not many, but the agony of that hour was recalled for all her life, at sight of any words which he had written.

"Tom tells me you will want to thank me for the few words I said to him to-night—this morning, rather. I am glad that you cannot do it while you are here; I am even glad that you cannot do it now, for I know how painfully it would be against your will.

"While you are reading this I shall be leaving Wye, only

to return when I am man enough to bear such days as *this* has been. God bless you in the life before you, Hester! *If* love can make it bright for you, it will be bright. You *have* thought well, I know, before you made your choice; *and*, knowing all, have chosen. Your own sweet, unselfish spirit will gild the life for both of you; and a man who loves *as* simply, and hopefully, and gratefully as Tom loves, has a heart worth winning.

"Looking back to-night, even with this shadow round me, I can thank God that I have known you. But I cannot trust myself to see you again until I have courage to meet you as his wife, in the years to come. Ask him always to call me friend; ask him always to trust me generously, as he did to-night.

"With what strength and passion I have loved you, Hester, you will never know. You would not let me tell you when I tried; I am not base enough to tell you now. I cannot cast my unreturned love to these winds which roar around us now—around you, I trust, undisturbed in your peaceful sleep; around me in my loneliness, so far away from you! But I have laid it sacredly away, dead to you forevermore; never to trouble you again as I have seen it trouble you. Dearest, you have been to me of all the world; and if I let it be so still, it shall not make my life a coward's life. Farewell!"

"As his wife! As Tom's wife!"

This, then, he had let Lord Leaholme believe, when he told of his own dishonor.

"Oh, false and mean! Oh, false and mean!"

The words burst from her again and again as she paced the room; her hands—hot and burning now—clasped tightly.

"Oh, false and mean! I cannot wait. I must make Tom call back his untruthful words; and I will show him such scorn and such contempt that he can never think *that* thought again."

She sat down before her fire and tried to think quietly and calmly, but started up again in a minute, restlessly pacing backward and forward, her head throbbing with sorrow and remorse, as a crowd of bitter remembrances rushed through her brain, to that one miserable cry, "Too late!"

She remembered what Bella had called her to Mr. Hemming, in Lord Leaholme's presence—the words that Tom had dared to repeat to her. They two had taken away the happi-

ness of her life, she cried. Yet, in the midst of this strong passion, the truth was firm within her heart. It had been her own fault from the beginning, and the punishment which she must bear from to-day was one she had justly deserved.

At last her angry strength gave way, and she fell beside her bed in helpless tears, her slight frame shaken by the shivering sobs.

She did not know how long it was after that, when she opened the door to her little cousins, and let them sit beside her at the fire, and talk to her of her visit, until the dressing-bell rang. Then she sent them to Ruth, and began to dress.

Mrs. Bruce—from the head of the dinner-table—told James to send and hasten Miss Bruce, or they would have finished dinner before she came.

A few minutes afterward, Horton—stepping softly up to her mistress—whispered that she had found Miss Bruce lying down, and “very odd,” and did not know what to think of her.

When dinner was quite over, Bella left the gentlemen (not one of whom but, in her place, would have gone an hour before), and followed her mother to Hester’s room.

They whispered, as they looked down on the wide, bright eyes and burning lips, that she had excited herself too much at the abbey ball; they had thought so at the time. It was a great pity that she had gone—so very excitable as she was! Horton could send Ruth to sit up with her; Ruth could sleep in an easy-chair, and she was stronger than Horton.

“Get everything needful for the night, Ruth,” said Mrs. Bruce, gently, as the girl came softly in, thankful that she was chosen for this task; “and if you think it well, call me up at any time.”

And then they went down to tell Sir Randal that Hester was suffering a little from reaction, having allowed her childish excitement to carry her a little too far at Wye, and so exhausted her strength.

And Sir Randal stood moodily against the chimney-piece, listening hungrily to the short, smooth answers Mr. Bruce received to his many quiet questions and surprise at Hester’s “laying herself up.” And the little boys never asked to sit up later than usual, but went quietly up-stairs at their regular time, and helped each other to undress, “because Ruth is with Hester; and don’t let us make a sound, or Hester will be sure to send her to us.”

And Tom crept up-stairs on the points of his thin dress-boots, and stood outside Hester's door, listening breathlessly, never stirring until—having made Ruth hear—she opened it, and whispered a few words. Then he passed slowly on to his own room; and in the morning, before it was light, he was leaning and listening again outside the closed door.

All through that dreary night Hester's head tossed restlessly upon the pillows, and she lay moaning that the bells hurt her; then that she could not dance because her heart was broken. With a quick, tremulous cry, she said the organ must be shut—shut quickly, because it was the voice of them that weep; then murmured faintly and sobbingly that the weeping was among the ruins by the lake. At last the piteous, eager words faltered into silence; and then, in low, weak words, she began pleading, sadly and brokenly, with Tom.

Ruth drew back from the bedside and sat down out of hearing, trying not to listen to the sad, wandering words, while her own tears blinded her. How thankful she was—kind-hearted little Ruth!—that she had sat up instead of Horton, or one of the housemaids.

In the quiet dawn—just as Ruth looked out upon the gray streak, wondering how soon she could send for a doctor—Hester closed her wide, restless eyes, and lay in silence.

And as she lay so, after long hours, slowly the past came back to her with its miserable mistakes; and the future faced her with a bare and barren distinctness of its own.

But as the hours crept slowly by, there followed gentle thoughts, and true, brave resolutions; and when she remembered the bitter consequences of her one resolution never to forget a wrong that had been done, she lulled her anger and resentment to sleep, and prayed that she might be able to hide it now, and conquer it at last.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SIR RANDAL PLEADS.

THE faint January sunshine found its way into the morning-room at Churleigh, and kissed the hem of Hester's dress (with the only kiss she had received) when she first came from her own room, and sat down alone at the window, in its

cold embrace, too weak to read, although an open book lay on her lap.

A long, sharp ring of the hall-bell broke the silence that surrounded her; and she began wearily to wonder whether the old form of paying and receiving calls (so called) between those who never had loved each other, and never would, would ever be dispensed with or worn out.

In this languid thought, she heard her own door open, and, feeling sure that Tom had escaped the visitors, she smiled and spoke to him by name.

But a heavier step than Tom's advanced to her side, and a less pleasant face bent down to her, as Sir Randal Platt drew up a chair beside her, and spoke in a subdued, soft tone.

"I feel, when I see the paleness of your face, Miss Bruce, that it is almost cruel in me to have found my way here; but I am leaving Churleigh this afternoon. No need to tell you why I have staid to the limit of my time. You must have known from the first what was my attraction here, and why I could not leave while you were ill."

"It would be ungracious, then, to suppose that you are glad I am well again," she answered, trembling a little, in spite of her calm voice.

"Let me put down this heavy book," he said, in the same low, plausible, gentle tone. "What a heavy one for an invalid to choose, is it not?"

"Yes," she answered, letting him take the great volume of "Don Quixote" from her knee; "but I wanted pictures; and pictures too fanciful to remind me of natural, living ones."

"I see," he replied, resuming his seat; "you wanted, if possible, not even to *think*, and it is unkind in me to break upon that desired rest."

"Who is in the drawing-room, Sir Randal?" she asked, dreading what he should say.

"Mrs. and Miss Berkeley. I am going to drive home with them after lunch, and from there I go on to London, unless—unless you allow me to return here to-morrow to speak to Mr. Bruce."

"I allow you to return, Sir Randal?" she questioned. "I am neither your host nor hostess here."

"Nevertheless, it is only for your permission that I wait, because—I love you, Miss Hessie."

"I feared so," she said, simply, "and I tried to show you how useless and—unwise it was."

"How could I help myself?" he exclaimed, hotly. "Listen to me a moment. You have gained such power over me——"

"Please don't speak of this," she pleaded, the young face white and earnest. "I can but say one word to it all, and you know what that one word is."

"I have learned to love you," he continued, with bitter steadiness, "more than any one or anything in earth or heaven, and you must listen to me."

But she hardly heard a word. Her head swam as (his assumed gentleness all vanished in his eagerness) he poured out a passionate declaration of his love for her, the first and only love which he had ever known, he said, or ever cared to know; a love which had been strong and fierce within him ever since he had seen her first; a love such as no other man on earth could offer her—Sir Randal always took care particularly to mention when he meant to allude to things or people on earth, as if much of his intercourse would naturally be held in heaven—or elsewhere.

Hester's face grew paler and paler at his words, and her eyes drooped wearily under his steadfast and impassioned gaze.

"I cannot listen to this," she cried; "I cannot."

He had risen then, and was standing opposite her, looking down with keen, glittering eyes.

"Why can you not listen? Why may I not tell you of my love as any other man would?"

"And why may I not answer as I choose, as any other woman would, Sir Randal?" she asked, with quick fearlessness.

His frown gathered ominously, but he pleaded still; never silenced by her low, firm negative, never silenced even when she rose and attempted to leave the room.

"I cannot take your answer," he said, almost savagely seizing the little trembling hand that leaned for support upon the table, and holding it between his own. "I must try again, for—Hessie, you are dearer to me than my own life."

"I shall never answer you again, Sir Randal," said Hester, with emphatic slowness. "I will never let you speak to me alone again."

"What is your answer, then?" he asked, his voice hoarse in his anger.

"That I never could return your love," she said, as quietly as she could, "even if you told me of it every day. And that I am very sorry you have given it me at all."

"And you reject me?"

"Yes."

"You will repent it—you *must*—for I cannot forget this, nor will I lightly bear to lose my love, my beauty. Think once more before you send me away. Who could ever love you better than I do, Hessie?"

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it again and again, while hot tears trembled on her eyelids.

"You know that I am weak and alone, or you would not dare this!" she said, her eyes flashing.

"Give me another answer, then," he whispered, his face flushing crimson. "Tell me only to wait."

"There is only one answer I can give, as I have told you."

"Is there some one else in my way?" he asked, forgetting himself in his eagerness.

"I do not quite understand you," she answered, quietly.

"Have you given all your love away, Hessie?"

"If ever I do that," she answered, with quivering lips, and proud, sad tone, "it will be to a *gentleman*. That is negative enough for you, Sir Randal."

In spite of the frail form and white face, and the eyes that were feverish in their anger, she looked so strong and beautiful in her youth and purity, that he cowered a moment under her gaze. Then, with a sudden start he bent his head, left one quick, burning kiss upon the small, scornful lips, and went hastily from the room.

Hester crept up-stairs when he was gone, and washed her face energetically, but did not go in to luncheon; and Bella wondered aloud at intervals throughout the evening why Sir Randal Platt had not thought it worth while to go just into the next room to say good-bye to Hester, when people had pretended to see so much devotion in his conduct at the ball.

But Hester did not mind then, for the little boys were come home from their ride, and in their joy at having her down-stairs again she had pleasure enough.

So Sir Randal was gone, and there were other good-byes to follow. The time was come for Alfie and Wattie to go to school, and this was a very sad parting to Hester, who knew, too, that the time was drawing near for Tom to go abroad, as his step-father had long promised he should do.

But before that—it was, indeed, as it amused Hester to find, on St. Valentine's morning—she received a letter from Pollie Goldsmith; a letter different from Pollie's usually simple and loving ones; a long, vague letter, in which she minutely describes a visit Mr. Delahoyde had paid her after Hester left; and then—far from minutely—touched upon the contents of a little letter he had sent her since; mysteriously hinted at undeserved happiness, and, with many interruptions and much rambling, told Hester how good he was, and how unworthy she herself. In short—though Pollie had decidedly expressed it in long—Hugh had asked her to be his wife, and she had consented with happy gladness. And Hester laid her little hands upon the letter, and looked out with misty, thankful eyes.

Other letters, following this, told her “It” was to be in the spring; and would Hester—in her love and kindness—come for It, and be her only guest and bridesmaid, and so make her happiness perfect? And Hester determined to do so, be It when it would; and obtained her uncle's consent immediately, not much heeding Bella's sneering remark that “It was provoking enough to have a clergyman who was a nobody himself, without his finishing up by marrying a governess, and expecting her to be received.” Bella did not particularize what Hugh “finished up” by his marriage; nor whether his wild expectation was that his bride should be “received” by Miss Lane.

“I shall not call, if I have my way,” she muttered, which threat, even if carried out, would not, Hester thought, greatly mar the little bride's happiness; “*you* may do it all. It is just on a par with your usual ridiculous notions of standing godmother to dirty cottage babies.”

Hester tried to avoid the subject after this, but Bella seemed to enjoy snapping it out on every convenient and many an inconvenient opportunity, and Hester could only try all the harder not to grow fretful or solitary and reserved, as she felt sadly inclined to do. How earnestly she strove and prayed against it, her own heart only knew; how she succeeded was proved by Mr. Bruce's speech, nearly a year afterward:

“Guess? How could I guess it, when she was always the veriest sunbeam that ever gladdened a man's home?”

The last good-bye came on a gray, chill February morning, such as makes a parting doubly drear. The carriage was at

the door, and a group had gathered in the hall waiting for Tom to come down. Hester, running up to tell him so, met him at the school-room door. His handsome young face saddened at the sight of her, and he drew her into the empty room.

"Hessie," he said, brokenly, "let us part here, before we join the others down-stairs. Oh, this is horribly hard!"

"Why, Tom!" she cried, with an echo of her old laugh, "who would imagine you were starting for a tour of amusement, and were going to do such wonderful——"

But she, too, broke down as their eyes met, for she was anxious for him in her very heart. And she knew, too, that her own dull and hopeless life would grow more gloomy when he was gone.

"Good-bye," she said, a world of tenderness in her eyes. "Good-bye, dear Tom."

"Good-bye, my dear, dear Hessie," he whispered, struggling with himself. "Only a few months for the French polish and German gilding to do their work, and then home to begin life in earnest. What is to be for me, my love?"

"The life of a man who keeps all the brave resolutions he made when he left college, Tom."

"But the life of a man—however resolution-keeping—is very gloomy by itself."

"I think the life of a man who is worthy to be called a man can never be kept to himself."

"You always turn away that subject, Hessie."

"Because, you see, we are cousins, Tom, and I should not like to drop the pleasant relationship."

"But if, in dropping it——"

"Do not think of dropping it, Tom," she interrupted, hastily; "it does us both good, and there is nothing else which can ever take its place."

"I know you look upon me as a boy, Hessie," he said, sadly, "and now, I fear, as an unsteady one; but you shall see what firmness I have to wait and hope."

"Ah! Tom, you need all your firmness—and the help of a higher strength, too—for something else."

"I know, dear; to resist, you mean. I will do that, too; and I will tell you when we meet what was the hope that took me safely through temptation."

"There is only one Hope which can do that, dear Tom."

"All right. But the other hope would do it, you will see. Dear, shall you miss me?"

"Very, very much."

"But you missed the children quite as much when they went to school?" he asked, wistfully.

"Yes, I think so. Churleigh has lost most of its brightness now."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Are you fretting, dear, about anything?"

She laughed, and that was negative enough for him.

"Do not take to heart Bella's coldness," he said, tenderly; "she is only spiting everybody for Leaholme's absence. She cannot understand it, and vents her disappointed ambition on all of us—on you, especially. As for the mother, she can't help her nature. Don't mind her indifference. Be independent of it, dear. She, too, is suffering from Bella's complaint, and we all know that hope deferred maketh the disposition sour. It will all wear off under Hemming's consolations. And Hessie, dear, though he doesn't show it very publicly, the governor loves you a *slight* degree better than Bella; especially now she is so disagreeable. Dear me! what is to keep Leaholme here at her pleasure? A nice occupation for him, smoothing her ruffled feathers."

"Perhaps you will meet with him abroad," Hester said, slowly, as if the words were an effort.

"Possible, but not at all probable, dear; he knows the old route too well to be wandering upon it now; he is not very fond of beaten tracks. I only hope I may, but I do not expect it. Good-bye, once more; think of me sometimes."

"I shall be always following you in my thoughts, Tom."

"Let me have one long look into the beautiful face I love. Hester, will you—will you kiss me?"

She raised her head and kissed him quietly, with a kiss which an older man would have felt as a death-blow to such a hope as Tom was nourishing.

"Dear Cousin Tom, good-bye."

He held her in his arms a few moments without speaking; then went away with his frank blue eyes full of tears.

The spring came on apace. Mr. Hemming—staying in the neighborhood again—resumed his attentions to Bella, and made daily visits to Churleigh. Bella grew gayer again, though more exacting; while, day by day, there grew upon Hester a tired, listless feeling, which she could not shake off,

and of which she was pitifully ashamed; thinking it must surely be her own fault that it had gained this mastery over her. She tried to be out as much as possible; but she gradually had to own to herself that she could not walk as she had used to do, and had to rest very often, even in a stroll in the park.

The trees round Churleigh were growing faintly, brightly green, as the leaves burst from their buds; the air was laden with the fresh, glad scents and sounds of early spring; and everything looked pure and spotless, fresh from its Maker's hand once more.

Hester—traveling by herself to Birmingham to be Pollie's bridesmaid—looked out upon the sunny meadows, as the train rolled over them like a shadow, with her busy little head very full of thoughts. All forward thoughts to-day—of happiness that was coming to others. No backward thought should be allowed to interfere with this visit. Was not there much to rejoice over for Pollie?—the certainty of her joy; the full assurance of Hugh's. Was not there the glad prospect of having this dear old friend near to her through the—the years to come? No need to stifle thoughts like these; and Hester let them travel with her, until the engine panted into the busy station; and nervous, happy little Pollie, who had been pacing the platform ever since the train had leisurely crawled out of Wolverhampton station, forty minutes before, rushed toward the radiant face which nodded to her from the carriage window.

“Never mind the luggage,” said Hester, laughing and enjoying Pollie's new embarrassment. “It is only a bridesmaid's costume, and the wedding—I beg your pardon, I mean the ceremony you call ‘It’—can be delayed, if my box is lost.”

There was a wonderful greeting awaiting Hester when they reached home; and she was welcomed, she said, with her old sweet laugh, “just like the prodigal daughter;” yet Pollie was not the only one who glanced often and anxiously into the pale, small face, as if it had something in it that was new and sad.

That night there was a grand private exhibition of Lord Leaholme's letter and present to Pollie and Hugh, which had been sent to Hugh before the earl left England, to be delivered afterward. Such a present! It seemed to take Pollie's breath

away every time she displayed it—a ceremony which had been performed almost hourly since its arrival,

“All silver, Hessie!” she exclaimed, forestalling Hester’s own discoveries, “and isn’t it chaste? And all engraved! And shouldn’t you think it is plate enough for a grand house—almost for Leaholme Castle, shouldn’t you think?”

Hester smiled as she took up each thing separately, and admired it to Pollie’s heart’s content; but as she put them down, with a tender, lingering touch, she thought, in her own uncalculating little mind, that the generous, thoughtful letter which came with them was worth them all. But, then, she was not going into housekeeping.

“Hessie,” began Pollie, with odd suddenness, “where is he now?”

“I have never heard,” replied Hester, simply.

“But oh! Hessie, you surely know where he is gone?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head slowly, as, with wide, sad eyes, she tried to read Pollie’s face.

“And have you never seen him since the ball?”

“Never.”

“I have,” Pollie whispered, very gently laying her hand on the one of Hester’s which still held his letter. “And last time I saw him, Hessie, I found him in Jemima Kimble’s little room; and she was talking to him more pleasantly than I ever heard her talk to any one before. And he sat there with her like an old friend, without a shade of strangeness or stiffness in the visit; but I don’t believe there could be that in *his* visits. And Jemima has kind, thoughtful presents, too, now—just as I have had. Oh! Hessie, was not that a good way to see him for the last time?”

“Hush, Pollie,” whispered Hester, starting involuntarily, “do not talk of last times.”

Two happy, quiet days they all spent together in the old house; and there was no sadness in the mother’s loving heart, although her only daughter was leaving her so soon. There was no cloud of self upon this time. Each one was cheerful for the other’s sake, and thoughtful only for the other’s happiness; so that even that long, long talk on the last night of all was more happy than sorrowful.

“A pretty, quiet little wedding,” pronounced the few stragglers who were there to see the dresses (which, of course, are the only features worth remarking in a wedding), and who saw a great deal, too; but only *happened*, perhaps, to hear

the low answers whispered and lost in the high, cold church; "very pretty, indeed."

And so it was; though Mr. Ferriman, who was Hugh's best man, noticed that once, as she listened to Pollie's earnest whisper, the bridesmaid unconsciously clasped her hands together, and a still, white look crept over her bright face.

But no one else saw her struggle with this weakness; and through the elongated breakfast, where no one could manage to eat anything, even to keep the hearty old clergyman in countenance, she was the gayest and most helpful of them all.

Then came a fluttering, hysterical, congratulatory, weeping scene between Pollie and Aunt Phyllis—a tearful, gasping, embracing one, which included the mother; and Hester detained Hugh at the hall window to allow Pollie still one more last kiss, and still one more last word; and more last kisses again, and more last words.

"Years and years ago, when old Baxter died, Mr. Delahoyde," she said, gravely — "the 'Saints' Rest' man, you know—some one published his last words. They sold so well that it seemed a pity to lose a good opportunity, so presently appeared a new work, 'More Last Words of Richard Baxter.' I am forcibly reminded of it to-day. Are you?"

He laughed heartily.

"You speak as if it were a fact beyond dispute; even within your own knowledge, Miss Bruce."

"I forget who told me; but, of course, it is beyond dispute. I fear you are inclined to be skeptical. I must warn your parishioners of the fact when I resign my further interference in the parish."

"When you do?" laughed Hugh.

"Of course I shall," she said, never glancing in Pollie's direction, "to my pastor's wife."

"I would not answer for what will happen if you do, Miss Bruce," he answered. "There is no one else so welcomed. The schoolmaster's old mother is not the only one who likes to sit where she can see 'the young lady coming from Churleigh.'"

"That is Miss Lane," put in Hester, seriously.

"Once I pretended I thought so," said Hugh, with a merry sparkle in his happy eyes, "but she set my mind at rest with the utmost precipitation. 'Bless yer heart, sir, do ye think I'm meaning *that* little ribbintin' thing?'"

"And doesn't the name just suit her?" laughed Pollie, joining them at last. But Hester did not answer, and Hugh, trying to look apologetic, said he had not meant to tell her, only that she had presumed an impossibility.

"Now, dear," cried Aunt Phillis, nervously, "the train will be gone." But Pollie's sobbing, clinging kiss had to be given to her bridesmaid. Then Hugh handed his wife into the hired carriage that had been kept waiting so long; put under her special care, at her especial request, the beautiful silver-mounted dressing-case which had been Hester's gift; then followed himself.

A slipper sped after the carriage; a head popped out for a minute, even in the public street; a white figure on the door-step nodded to it, staying to watch the carriage till it passed out of sight.

Then the street was an every-day street again, and the home had a sad void in it, which was to grow greater and sadder when Hester went away, and left the two old ladies to keep on the little house alone.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BELLA'S PLANS.

THROUGH the summer Tom's letters arrived pretty regularly. Loving, pleasant letters they were, but telling very little of himself. Neither his mother nor sister seemed to notice this. They liked, they said, to see how he remembered every one and everything at home; how unselfishly he wrote, and what pretty, slight descriptions of foreign life he sent them. Hester longed and craved for something more than this. These letters told nothing of the life he himself was leading; of the way he spent his time; of the carrying out of the earnest purpose of the winter. And the summer was passing, and the year would soon be over, she thought, as she sat reading one of these letters on the terrace steps in the September twilight—the year which she felt must be the turning-point in Tom's life. She put his letter away with a little sigh, and took out one from her little cousins. So often they wrote to her; so fully and frankly, telling their troubles, telling their pleasures, and asking her help or her sympathy in everything. And always so glad they were of her kind,

funny letters, and the laughable little drawings she inclosed! She would not think about anything else, she said; yet her heart was heavy as she slowly rose at last. Mr. Hemming was dining at Churleigh that evening, and it was as much to escape him, as to enjoy the twilight rest, that she had left the drawing-room alone.

Bella was making tea when she entered, and she gave Hester her uncle's cup to hand to him. He looked rather searchingly into her face as he took it, thoughtfully stroking her white cheek instead of thanking her.

"Where is Mr. Lane, now?" Mr. Hemming was asking.

"We are never sure," Mrs. Bruce answered, laughing; "he is a regular will-o'-the-wisp."

"Enjoying himself somewhere, I'm sure."

"Yes; I wish we were all with him," said Bella, from the tea-table. "We haven't been anywhere this summer."

"Should you like to go abroad?" asked Mr. Bruce, quizzically.

"Oh, I should love it!" exclaimed Bella.

"Should you all like it?"

"I shall not make myself small for nothing, Alfred," said his wife, languidly.

"You shall go if you like."

"Oh, papa, do you really, really mean it?"

"Of course you are joking, Alf."

"Not at all."

"How could we go?"

"You need not question of the 'how,' because I shall take you."

"Will you? Can you?"

"I will—for I can."

"Thank you, dear papa. Oh, it will be beautiful!"

"Hessie, you say nothing. Are you not glad?"

"I think I am too glad to say it, uncle."

"That is right. Now remember that it is a settled thing. Let me see. Can you be ready in a week?"

"Oh, yes!"

So it was decided in those few words; but Hester knew, by the stammering hints Mr. Hemming let fall, as he stood talking of this trip, that in the end he would join them, too.

Mrs. Bruce seemed to read this fact in her teacup, as she looked into it for a long time, placidly stirring its contents. When the time for his departure came he managed to propose

it boldly. Mrs. Bruce, taken by surprise, thought that indeed it would be very pleasant—if he did not think it would be a tie upon him. Bella blushed and smiled, resolving to do all she could to tighten and strengthen the tie it was to be upon him.

He thanked them both—Bella most profusely—and went away in high spirits.

Mr. Bruce did not think he was necessary in the discussion which began then so excitedly; so took his cigar out upon the terrace, while they all sat and talked of what they should see, and who.

“I think,” said Mrs. Bruce, at last, lying back in her chair, “that Mr. Hemming will soon speak to you more seriously, Bella, dear. You should make up your mind what to say in such a case.”

“I shall put him off for a time,” answered Bella.

Her mother, looking in the opposite direction, spoke again to her gently.

“In some respects this would be as good a match for you as the other; not, of course, in point of rank, but in some other points. Edward Hemming is rich, and much more—more easy and adaptable in temper than Earl Leaholme. Even I myself am sometimes a little startled by Lord Leaholme: he goes so far into things.”

Mrs. Bruce did not explain what she meant by this; but the girls seemed each satisfied with her own definition of that somewhat vague criticism.

“I think he is so very kind and courteous, mamma; so do you—you know you do.”

“Yes; but I always fancy it is because he cannot be anything else; not because he thinks more highly of you than any one else. It always ought to seem so, you know, when you talk to a gentleman.”

“You have always till lately said—oh! everything good of him. Now it is just your interest to praise some one else.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Bruce, submitting quietly to this rebuke, “you will be obliged to give Mr. Hemming a definite answer when he asks you.”

“Oh, I hope we shall meet Lord Leaholme on the Continent. I am quite hopeful now. And if he proposes to me, of course Signor Eduardo must accept his *conge*.”

“Oh, Bella,” said Hester, roused at last, “do you care for neither, then?”

"What has that to do with what I said, pray? I shall marry, of course, and I would slightly rather have some one whom everybody wants, than the recipient of several refusals."

"But, Bella, *that* is not all you think of?"

"No; I think of something else. I think of the unpleasantness of a mother and sister-in-law attached to me, as I must have in the one case."

"And nothing more?"

Hester asked it almost unconsciously, little expecting the sharp and cutting answer it would bring.

"No, that is all. I will leave the rest to you. You do the loving part so well yourself; so openly, too. All the world saw how mad you were because Lord Leaholme did not dance with you, or pay you any attention at the abbey ball; and I am sure he saw it himself, too, only he thinks too highly of our family to remark it. No, I will not take a leaf out of *your* book, thanks!"

Hester rose, her lips tightly set—the pretty, quivering, red lips so drawn with pain—and prepared for bed.

"Bella, dear," began her mother, pacifically, "you should not speak so. It is unkind and mortifying to Hessie, and she will have her turn soon."

Not trusting herself to say good-night, Hester went up to her room, to battle alone with the old rebellious temper which seemed to peep out often now, try as she would to keep it subdued.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A DEAD TRUST.

THE busy week of preparation passed rapidly, and Hester, on the last afternoon, rode over to say good-bye to Pollie. It had been her greatest pleasure all through that sad, sad summer, to go and see Pollie and Hugh. And never, until long afterward, did they guess what a sorrowful heart had been seeking sympathy and comfort, while they had greeted the sweet face as the brightest sunbeam that ever looked in upon them. This day she had sat longer than she had intended with Anne Moore, having found her little godchild ailing in an unaccountable manner, as children delight in doing without any conceivable pretext; so she had only time to draw up her horse for a few minutes at the rectory gate.

Out to her came Pollie, in a little excitement.

"Hugh is dressing, Hessie, or he would not let you ride away in this manner."

"'I love, and I ride away,'" laughed Hester. "For what is he dressing particularly? and how will he look when the performance is completed?"

"He is going to dine in Hereford," said Pollie, seriously, "and I am very, very sorry."

"Jealous already, Mrs. Delahoyde?"

"No; it is a gentleman's party; but some one I can't bear to have anything to do with will be there."

"Sir Randal Platt, of course. I thought he was abroad."

"He has been abroad all the summer, and he is going again, I know, because Miss Berkeley is going to Paris in his charge—in *his* charge," repeated Pollie, with unconscious, scornful emphasis. "Hessie, do you know what they say, and what I firmly believe?"

"Yes; lots of things."

"That he is very rich," continued Pollie, too much in earnest to notice Hester's answers, and her face all full of disgust, "with money—won abroad—gambling, and—worse."

"What is worse, Pollie?"

"Oh, you know; dishonest gambling. They say he spends most of his time doing that. Can you wonder that I should dislike his meeting Hugh or me?"

"Or that I should dislike his meeting you or me; eh, Pollie? But cheer up! What power could a hundred Sir Randal have to hurt your husband? Has Mrs. Goldsmith written since she left you?" she added, changing the conversation. "How she and Miss Roberts did enjoy their visit, didn't they?"

"I think they did," said Pollie, with suppressed pride and delight; "and when Aunt Phyllis went home, she found the house exactly where it had been; and not even robbed, much to her surprise, I am sure. Oh, Hessie, I was so proud and happy to have them here," continued the young wife, brightly—"here, in my own dear happy home!"

"I almost think you appreciate properly your happy home, Pollie, dear," said Hester, softly, as she watched her beaming face.

"I am only afraid that I do not feel thankful enough; I, who have done nothing through all my life to deserve it.

Think of its being given to me, with such a husband's love!"

Hester smiled, laying her little hand softly on Pollie's head.

"Let Hugh and others decide that, dear Pollie; and don't you think God is a better judge than we are, to whom it is safe to give happiness here?"

Pollie snatched the caressing hand in hers, and looked up fondly.

"Don't speak so, Hessie darling; it sounds so sad; and I always feel as if only happy thoughts belonged to you. What is in your words sometimes so—so longing, or so patient?"

"Mr. Delahoyde," she said, with a laughing little bow to Hugh as he came down the lawn, "this is a new kind of call I am making at your gate. Do you allow your wife to linger hatless in the sun?"

Hugh turned to Pollie then, with such a glance of love and tenderness that Hester carried it away in her heart, rejoicing over it on her solitary ride, as the brightest smile she could possibly have seen on the face of the stern To-day.

And it was well for the tender heart to carry away the last picture of Hugh and Pollie. As she rode on, there came back to her that sad time when she had sat in the quiet house nursing the dying child; and she recalled lovingly—almost longingly—the patient little face to which the light of happiness had come so suddenly. There came back to her the gladness she had felt that Hugh had one so true a friend in his grief. And then—thinking of the brother soothed and comforted now, and thinking of the friend who had helped to cheer him, and who had been *her* friend once—she remembered a few words that had clung to her ever since she had read them during that first, hopeful, happy visit to Pollie.

"Earthly loves are deep and tender,
Not eternal and divine."

"*Not* eternal and divine," she repeated, a strange shadow falling over the upturned face. "No, for if they were, earth would be heaven itself. Deep and tender is theirs, surely," she added, still re-picturing that last glimpse of Hugh and Pollie, confident of their happiness, and rejoicing over it as she walked her horse slowly up the avenue.

In high spirits the little party sat out on the morrow; and of the weeks that followed, only a few days stood out clear and sharp in Hester's memory afterward. The rest was a

time of strange, mingled happiness and disappointment, hope and dread. A time full of the intense pleasure she always felt in visiting beautiful places, and the intense pain of hope deferred.

One of these was the day she and her uncle spent alone in the Louvre, while the others were shopping. One was the day of their arrival in Geneva, when they found a card of Tom's; and, questioning their landlord, discovered that the fair young monsieur had left there early in the summer, with a baron *Inglese*, on their way to Chamouni, he believed.

"You look better, Hessie," said her uncle, as they drove off. "Foreign air has done you good already, though it seems to me laden with garlic."

To Hester it seemed laden with hope. Then there came the day of their arrival in Rome, when they found there, unclaimed, the last letters they had sent Tom; a discovery which clouded the bright anticipations with which they had entered the city.

Then there came one day there when Colonel Platt found Hester out, and took her to spend a few hours with his wife. At first she was disappointed to find that this only day she could spend with them was one of their receptions; but when the time came, she found herself enjoying the novel scene, her eyes wandering with artistic delight among the glittering uniforms, rare flowers, and gorgeous dresses. And she listened, amused, to the unhomelike jargon of the different languages, bringing forth her own German and Italian fearlessly, and laughing merrily over her many blunders.

But presently a darkness came down upon it all. A voice she knew, and remembered with a throb of fear, said within her hearing:

"*Voici, matante.* I have brought *mio amico*, as you permitted. Mr. Lane, Mrs. Platt."

Hester looked up, laughing at Sir Randal's mild failure at French and Italian, but with her eyes full of welcome for Tom.

In a moment she bent them again, hiding them from the haggard, dissipated face of which she had caught sight; the weak, vacant face which she had seen so bright and pleasant.

"I am proud of this honor, signora, and unworthy." The unsteady voice seemed to pierce Hester's heart, and she moved away out of hearing before either Tom or Sir Randal had seen her,

Yet she could not leave the gay rooms. She must see and speak to Tom. She waited in real pain, until at last she saw him coming toward where she stood, looking eagerly into the faces he passed. The wandering, restless eyes brightened when they saw her.

"Hessie, I had no idea you were here until this moment. I hope Platt will not find out. Take my arm, dear."

"No, thank you, Tom; but I will come with you."

"Why do you look at me so, when we have not met for so long?"

"But why?"

"Well, I suppose because I have rather avoided the governor. I certainly do not care to meet him just now, and that's the melancholy fact. He is not here, is he?"

"He is here in Rome, still expecting to meet you."

"Then I must be off; I dare not meet him, you know, Hessie."

"I do not know. You seem to be able to dare—much more than that."

"Oh, I am all right. He himself told me to enjoy myself, don't you remember? I am with Leaholme most of my time, dear."

"Tom, is that true?"

Her voice was strangely stern and frightened.

"Of course it is, dear; he hangs after me a good deal. He is a capital fellow, and has the *entree* everywhere, but"—Tom shrugged his shoulders expressively—"I am not sorry to lose his society a little now and then, especially when Platt is about."

"Tom, you will come with me in the morning?"

"Where?"

"Home. To Uncle Alf and your mother."

"Thank you, little lady, but I should prefer another direction; I would go anywhere to see you—except where they are."

"Why have you avoided us all this time? Have you been weak and silly always, as you are to-night?"

He tried to look hurt and indignant, but failed signally, in his wavering gladness at having her with him.

"Oh, Tom," she cried, all her heart's longing and anxiety written in her face, "oh, Tom, come with me before it is too late! Stop on the brink of the wretched precipice to which

this life is leading you. Now, Tom, dear cousin, before it is too late!"

She saw his eyes grow moist as she spoke, but she felt they were only shallow, sentimental tears, and she covered her eyes with her hand, in bitter pain to see them.

He took the hand down with his old gentleness.

"I am rather—rather shaky to-night, Hessie," he said, humbly; "but I am going to change, I am, indeed. I will see the governor presently—when I am myself again. Platt is a dissipated fellow, rather, and he leads me on. I was better until he came back from England again a week ago. Never mind, love, I cannot bear to see you look mournful; here, too, where everybody is so gay. I will be a better, steadier fellow. Hessie, I love you so dearly, yet I seem always to make you miserable. What am I to do?"

"Come home, Tom, as you say."

"Yes, indeed I will."

"Thank you. I am so glad, and so will you be."

"After to-morrow I will join you," he said. "You will promise not to tell my father you have seen me until then, and I will promise to come."

"Is this a man's promise, Tom?"

"Indeed it is, dear. I will come to you the morning after to-morrow; and if you have left here just leave me a line, and I will follow at once. If you are only out for the day, you will find me comfortably at home when you return."

"I will depend on you, Tom; but I depended on you once before, when you made me the vow that lies in ashes now. Is this to be broken, too?"

"No, no; and thank you for trusting me again. How beautiful you look to-night, Hessie—beyond any one here! It reminds me of the Twelfth-night ball, only you are so pale to-night, and were so happy then. I am always thinking of you, dear."

She smiled faintly.

"You would be better, perhaps, if you thought of better things, Tom."

"I could not do that. How fiercely hot it is here!"

"Go back now, Tom, will you? I am going to my room."

"Ah! there's Platt. Is it to avoid him? Because if so, I'll take him."

"Oh, no!" she interrupted quickly. "Let him stay here. You will go, Tom, won't you?"

"Yes; I don't see what fun there will be when you are gone. Won't you really take my arm?"

She shook her head. Think of leaning on him! So they walked side by side through the brilliant rooms, his slight figure swaying a little in spite of all his efforts, and stopped on the gallery outside the reception-rooms, where Sir Randal joined them eagerly. Hester returned his greeting with quiet, grave politeness.

"Good-night, Tom," she said, softly, before she escaped; "you have made me an earnest promise, remember."

And then Sir Randal's detaining words were lost, for she had slipped away.

The guests were, many of them, leaving then; and as Hester walked slowly along the gallery, she looked down upon the gay figures; lingering while her eyes sought Tom on his way out. She felt that she could not rest until she had seen him leave the house alone. Suddenly she stood still; her hands grasped the marble; her eyes grew wide and piteous in their gaze. Tom's light laugh and giddy words reached her with a mockery in their gayety; and Sir Randal's eager eyes, straying in every direction, had no power to turn her own away, or to make them droop; for—with him and Tom, talking, laughing as lightly as Tom himself—there went slowly down the wide, crowded staircase—oh! were her eyes deceiving her, or was this some dreary dream?—there went with them Earl Leaholme.

Then there dawned the day when Hester's trust faded, spite of her determination to hope on through a few more hours. By that evening the doubt was settled, and her trust in Tom was dead.

There came a few lines to her, in which Tom apologized for his broken promise, regretted that he could not see her again, assuring her that circumstances were all against it, and, hoping to meet her soon at home, remained, with dear love—

But, stopping there, Hester tore the paper into a hundred fragments, as she stood on the balcony, and the breeze took them slowly and languidly away. If any breath of hers could have blown the memory of the writer with them, away from her forever, at that moment, as her eyes followed the contemptible words, she would willingly have breathed that breath. She must tell her uncle now; it was her last hope of saving Tom. He came out to her upon the balcony,

almost as she thought the thought. Mrs. Bruce had retired, and Bella and Mr. Hemming were below in the gardens.

In a few minutes she had told him of having seen Tom. She hardly heard his muttered words, but his face reminded her of her father's on that morning in London when the old grief had been brought before him again so suddenly. And, remembering all the trouble such a sin as this had caused, she could only cling to him silently and hide her face.

It was some time before he spoke directly to her; and then he only said, "Leave this to me, dear child. Do not fret for him, or this will spoil the benefit of your journey, and the roses will never come back. Now go to bed, and think of nothing sad."

She went at once, leaving him with still that baffled look upon his face; and she felt sure that he would not speak to her again of Tom until he had seen him.

Hester was bidding her aunt good-night, when Bella came into the room, less sprightly than usual. "Mamma, I've done it at last!" she said, with a rush at the words, as she fingered nervously the ribbons on her dress.

"Done what, dear? Oh, I know! I am very glad, indeed, my love," her mother said, in a voice of great satisfaction. "I felt sure that you must do it during this tour. I congratulate you, love."

Bella bent over the bed for her mother's kiss, but made but a short ceremony of it, and rose again, laughing.

"I suppose, as marriages go, mine will be a very good one. I am but a penniless girl, I know, though I *am* well-born. And I expect that, with expensive tastes and desires, and no money but a pittance from the charity of my step-father, I should have cut but a sorry figure, eh, mamma?"

"That would never have been while I live," said Mrs. Bruce, almost apologetically; "but, of course, it is far better for you to marry well now."

"I might certainly have done better in point of family," resumed Bella, in a business-like tone, "but I do not much care"—which was a very philosophical reflection of Miss Lane's, considering the amount of caring she had undergone. "I shall have entirely my own way, and won't I quench the mother and sister-in-law! I shall spare myself no luxury, too, you may depend." A dependence which must have consoled her mother greatly.

"I wonder what Lord Leaholme will say when he hears of my engagement," went on Bella, complacently. "I hope he will feel his own meanness."

"How?"

"In wanting a rich wife when he has so much himself."

"You are not sure that he does," said her mother, feeling charitably disposed toward every one just then. "How can you tell, dear?"

"By my common sense. Every one saw that he was fond of me; Lydia was forever noticing it. And, of course, he went away for fear of being tempted to marry a poor girl. He will see now that the other rich men are not so mercenary. Hester, what, in the name of fate, is this for?"

Hester had come round to kiss her—unaccountably drawn to do it—in her gentlest and most loving way.

"I must give you my congratulations, too, dear Bella," she said, blushing at Bella's surprise, but speaking very earnestly.

"Thanks. Yes, I suppose that is the thing. I do not think it means much, though—except, of course," she corrected herself, "from you all at home here. I hope the mother and sister-in-law will not try it. I shall feel much inclined to laugh if they innocently make their own downfall a subject of congratulation. Well, I'm going to bed, now my day's work is over; and as I am in a benevolent mood just now, I will wish you a husband, too, Hester, though you will have my drawbacks over again, being very little less of a pauper than I am myself."

Then, at last, there came a bright, soft October-morning when Hester awoke at home; and this summer trip, with all its hope and all its bitter disappointment, had drifted away into part of that time of which she dared not think.

"The Past and the Future are nothing,
In the face of the stern To-day!"

She leaned from her window, and Alfy, running up to the house, stopped and threw her up a little bunch of roses, shouting how nice it was to have her home again, and to have a holiday on purpose.

She caught the flowers at the second throw, and told him she had not seen a little boy she loved so well all over the Continent.

And she tried, in her penitence and regret, to bring a bright and unselfish smile on that wan face of the stern To-day.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN ACCEPTED SACRIFICE.

HESTER and her uncle were alone together at Churleiga; for Mrs. Bruce and Bella had stopped, on their way home, to visit Mrs. Paley in Sussex Square; and Mr. Hemming had lingered in London, too, to be in attendance.

Such a great echoing place the house at Churleigh seemed to Hester! and the long hours she spent alone were very dreary ones sometimes, despite her efforts to make them busy and cheerful. And, to add to the loneliness, Pollie was away from the rectory, on a visit to her mother. One afternoon when Hester was returning from her ride, she met in the avenue a hired fly from Ruyglen. There was so much fear in every one of her anticipations now, that she caught herself standing anxiously to watch it out of sight again. Then she cantered round to the yard, and dismounting there, went in at a side door and ran up the back staircase to change her dress. Then she went softly down the hall stairs and peeped into the study: empty! her uncle's books open on the table as he had left them in the morning; as they must remain until he returned next day. Into the drawing-room: empty too! Into the morning-room: and there, close up to the fire, with his back to her, stood Tom.

She saw him before his eyes turned from the hearth; she saw the nervous flush on his quiet face; she saw the trembling of the hand which hung beside him. Then she came softly up to him, put her two hands on his shoulders, and raised her loving, pitying face to his.

She had forgotten his deceit, forgotten her own disappointment. She only knew that she saw him at home again—sad and regretful-looking, the young face pale and anxious, yet all different, she felt at once.

"Tom, dear Tom!" she said, at last, and could go no further; while his cry of joy broke off in stifled sobs.

Like two very children they cried together, for Hester could not help it, try as she would to be composed.

"Hessie," he said, presently, "may I tell you? I cannot look at you until I have told you all."

At first she tried to prevent him; but she saw that he really wished it, and she slipped down upon the rug, and, leaning her face against the couch as he sat down on it, she listened to the low, shamed voice.

"Hessie, you ought to turn your face quite away, for I have sunk too low ever to win a kind, dear smile from you again."

She touched his hand softly, without speaking, and he went on a little less hesitatingly.

"I dare not speak to you of the life I have led this year. I dare only recall it to my own heart with shame and contrition. I never resisted the evil, though I so solemnly promised you I would; never even tried to do so. Was not that alone enough to bring Heaven's justice down upon me? Even on that night I met you and renewed the promise—the *earnest* promise, as you called it—the daylight would have found me playing—madly and unsteadily as I have been playing all this time, as I might have been playing now, if I had not been taken away by a stronger will than my own. I hardly know how. Not by force, yet by something which, much as I fought against it, was my only safeguard; taken away by Leaholme. I cannot tell you what he has done for me, for I do not know it myself yet, as I do not know how he did it.

"I am learning it day by day, and I know if I am saved it is through him alone. He has been with me—nearly always with me—coming on the old beaten track of which I knew he was tired; never talking or acting Mentor for fear of turning me, in my stubbornness, from the lessons he so gently and so firmly taught; always seeming to others just a traveling companion, glad of my society—ah, think of it! glad of *my* society! Always watching me; helping me; guiding me; going with me into scenes which must have been hateful to his proud refinement; sometimes holding me back in a light, unnoticed manner; at others, when that failed, taking me away—a poor, weak, despicable wretch—that he might save me from greater sin.

"Oh, Hessie! the more I try to tell you, the more I feel the weakness of my words, and the impossibility of showing you what he did for me, and how he taught me at last the blessing of the repentant pain I suffered. God bless him! All my life shall show him my gratitude—with God's help; for I have proved how weak and fruitless are the vows which I have tried to keep without His help. I try to ask for it in

all things now, and—with that help, Hessie—I may begin a better life. Leaholme has obtained me the appointment which he used to talk of, and it is just the thing my father will like. Too good a one, I think, for I ought to have harder work.

“He has let me leave no debts behind me through all this heedless, wild career abroad. Heaven only knows what dishonor would have been upon my name now but for him. When I think of it I can hardly breathe; yet he will not let me feel my obligation when he can help it. The money—if I live and earn it—he will never let me repay; the kindness and forbearance I never could.”

Tom paused, his chest heaving painfully, and laid his hand on Hester's bent head; he could not see her face now at all. When he spoke again, it was still more slowly and quietly.

“I long to see my father, Hessie, yet I was thankful to find that you were here alone. I felt I must have your forgiveness first of all; not because I love you so much best, but because I have wronged you most of all. Hush, Hessie. I cannot hear you speak to me as you would speak, however I had sinned against you, until you know what I ask you to forgive. Months ago—I almost forget how, because I was so much surprised—I discovered a secret of Leaholme's. I discovered whom he loved better than his own life; and knowing the hopelessness of such a love to him—knowing how you disliked him, I was base enough to take every opportunity of boasting of your affection for me—your *love* I called it, as you, you know me so well, may guess. Perhaps I really did not know then that there was a real difference; but, if I had, I should have chosen to say it just the same, and to believe it according to my hope. And once—ay, more than once—when I was mad with wine, I taunted him that he could not win what I had won so easily. Hessie, Hessie, do not look upon me yet. It was not I; it was the drunken fiend within me. And, Hessie, he did not strike me to the ground; but afterward—when I was myself again—he begged me, as I loved you, not to give you that bitter grief of loving one you never could esteem. Not even then; not until a bitter time that followed—remembering all he had done for me, feeling all he was doing for me still—did the knowledge break upon me, of how differently we loved you; of what he was doing to spare you pain; of what I had been doing to give you, if you cared for me as I had let him believe, pain enough to break your heart. Hessie, could I have wronged you more deeply

than I have done? Speak to me one word now, before I tell you more. One word in compassion. *Tell me I have wronged you.*"

She looked up, a strange, deep pity in her eyes.

"You wronged yourself, Tom, being untrue. As for me, if you have ever wronged or harmed me, it is forgiven as freely, earnestly, heartily as I have been forgiven. *I to forgive you, Tom!*" she cried, with a quick, sobbing breath—"I to dare to forgive any one!"

"My dear, my dear," he whispered, "I ought not to feel so much happier because I have told you this, but I cannot help it."

"Because you can look back upon this wasted year, dear Tom," she said, tenderly, "as a lesson, and on to the better life that is beginning."

"I trust so."

He looked so wearied that she would not let him speak another word yet. He bent his head in his hand, the gentle little smile he gave her brightening his white, exhausted face. She sat beside him still and quiet, but the daylight and the firelight both struggled in vain to chase the shadows from her wistful, dreamy eyes.

Presently Tom spoke again, more hurriedly.

"I must tell you the end, Hessie. I cannot rest until I have done so. Oh, listen in patience, dear, for one more shameful truth—the last and worst! We had not met Platt for a few days—he had been in England, I believe—when, one night, he turned up in Homburg, and persuaded me to go in with him to the Kursaal. Leaholme and I had been there before, and I had seen its deviltry *as* deviltry. But I knew what Sir Randal meant by going in; and, but that I had no sense or courage left, I need not have been persuaded. Leaholme tried to keep me back, but in Platt's presence his arguments had no effect on me but to make me feel uncomfortable and dissatisfied with myself afterward. Well, we played, and played higher than ever that night. Let me hasten over it, in pity to you. Leaholme, smoking on the terrace or listening to the music, never seemed to stay long away from us. I thought Platt unusually talkative and excited; you can easily guess why I was incapable of seeing more than that. We played, and he lost; lost and lost again; and he laughed over it noisily, and boasted that it was better so than that I should lose 'poor boy.' His sneer stung me to play deeper—

higher, I mean—and yet, contrary to what had been for so long, he still lost. We staked once more. ‘*Rouge gagne !*’ and I had won again. I laughed long and foolishly; yet, though I saw his face so mistily, I shall never forget the cunning smile, the insulting smile upon it. Oh, Hester, he insulted me cleverly, cuttingly, to goad me on till I should turn upon him, too. I knew what was coming—I felt that it must come very soon—when Leaholme walked slowly up to us, by chance, as I thought. At sight of him, Sir Randal’s words grew keener and more insolent. This was what he had wanted—this had been his aim for long—a quarrel with Earl Leaholme. Balked of this, his purpose was best answered by me. He had been drinking through all our play, yet he was perfectly master of himself. If I tried, or even if you ought to hear, I could not tell what he said to Leaholme. ‘The noble English peer,’ he said, ‘had well trained the poor boy who was in his charge to pocket the receipts for both, and to insult a rival.’ I raised my right hand with his money in it, but Leaholme held it back firmly with his left, while Platt was taunting him of you—oh, Hessie, that I can bear to tell it! ‘Everybody knew why he kept me abroad. His lordship was jealous of the adopted brother. The noble peer,’ he hissed, ‘was, in fact, but a love-sick, underhand coward.’ Of course, Platt knew no man could pass that by. Leaholme, white as death with anger, still holding my wrist, raised his right hand as if he would have struck down the real coward before him, recoiled an instant, then threw his glove in Platt’s face.

“This was all Sir Randal had wanted; his eyes burned with exultation as well as rage. I had always known he hated Leaholme, but I never thought of his motive until afterward. When he had won from me all he could win—won from Leaholme, rather, as it was then—he would have a disgraceful story to tell of us; and would come home and tell it to you. You may well shudder, Hessie, but it is true; his whole pursuit of us, his whole conduct proves it; would have proved it then to me, if I had not been too blindly infatuated to listen to Leaholme, or to see the proof for myself. I might have seen, too, but for this blindness, how determined Leaholme was to ward off that quarrel with me, and, if he could do so by no other means, to take it on himself—as he knew Platt would be only too glad to let him—and so, at any cost, to save me,

“But let me tell of that wicked night. I was so contemptibly helpless and useless that I think I did nothing but sit in Leaholme’s rooms crying like a baby, until he sent me to bed as if I *had* been the baby I behaved like. And he was just the same as usual. I was sobered effectually when we breakfasted together in the morning, but useless and stupid still; and he had to tell me twice what I should have to do. It was nothing, after all; and when I said so he laughed. He had no messages to give me, he said, but if his adversary proved a good shot I was to unlock his desk, the key of which he showed me. I knew then that he had been up all night preparing for that. Then we went out together. Oh, what a morning it was! However long I live, I can never forget that walk in the silent dawn, with the horrible weight upon my heart and conscience. I think my eyes were almost blinded as I stood with a friend of Sir Randal’s, who told me what I had to do, for I only saw the two principal figures through a heavy mist. I did nothing, I could have done nothing then, to save my life, because I felt so powerless to save *his*. I heard my companion talk of a signal; I heard Sir Randal’s sneering reply to something Leaholme had said.

“‘Do it, then. Fire where you like, it matters not a jot to me.’

“Then I heard a shot, clear and sharp, ringing, as it seemed, through my very head. But the two figures stood there, still and erect as before. The man who stood beside me muttered a few words with a deep-drawn breath.

“‘By Heaven, he fired into the air!’

“Almost before the words had reached me, the report of another shot pierced my ear and brain. I think it was all like a wild, dreadful dream after that. I can remember hurling mad, fierce words at Sir Randal and his friend until they were beyond the reach of my voice; and nothing more, except Leaholme’s white, white face, and the blood that was thick upon me as I held him.

“Oh, Hessie, hush, my darling, my darling! Oh, hush! he was not dead, though we thought he was. There was a clever English physician in that vile place, whom I shall honor in my memory for all my life. And after long, long days and nights of agony, Leaholme knew me again, and slowly, feebly came back to us. This doctor nursed him, as I would have loved to do if I had the power. Yet, useless as I was, I could not leave him; and, even when he could not

speaking or moving, I fancied that he liked to see me beside him. And seeing this, Dr. Thurtees used to leave us quietly together. Once or twice, Hessie, in his unconsciousness, he spoke to *you*, and always spoke of you to me.

"Can you bear to hear this? Once when I was kneeling beside his bed, looking for some sign of returning consciousness—looking and longing intently—he touched my head softly with his left hand (the right was the wounded arm and shoulder), and whispered very low: 'Do not grieve, Hester. Can you not feel it best that he has suffered? he will pass through this a better and a stronger man. It has been a sad year for you, my poor, poor child, but there is no cause for grief, now. You loved him then, and he is a hundred times worthier of your love to-day.' At other times he spoke so, too, but I cannot bear to tell you. Oh, my dear, if his goodness to me—if the brave, unselfish things he did to save me, so much the braver and more unselfish because he thought them nothing himself—if the weak, contemptible return I made him—if the hopelessness of that time when I thought I had killed him, or the anguish I witnessed him suffer—if these did not quite break my hard, unfeeling heart, to hear from his own lips how strong and tender was this hopeless love of his, quite did it.

"Hessie, I used to pray then (as I had never learned to pray before in all my life), that even *this* blessing should be given him at last. But I felt so unworthy that I knew God had closed his ears to me.

"But he spared his servant, dear. Leaholme came home with me; he is in London now, and will come back to the abbey soon. In spite of his weakness and his wounded shoulder, he went through much trouble to get me this appointment, as I told you. The Premier seemed very glad, I thought, to do this for him, and so it was soon settled; and Leaholme was delighted, because, he said, my coming home would be all the pleasanter if my life—an earnest, regular life—were marked out and awaiting me. He is still under the care of Dr. Thurtees, who came with us from Germany on purpose, and his own man, Brandt, is quite a nurse.

"There, Hessie, I have told you but weakly of my sin; but more weakly still of Leaholme's goodness. Those months when, wayward and conceited, I sought my own pleasure only, night and day, and he rescued me, bore with me kindly, helped me cheerfully, judged me gently, they must tell their

own tale in the years to come. Hessie, Hessie, my darling, can you ever forgive me?"

He was bending over her with outstretched hands, and she raised her head and laid it on his shoulder; and, while he held it there, her low sobs ceased, and, in a broken whisper, she asked *him* too for pardon.

The fire burned low, and the daylight had all faded; but they did not notice it, in the brightness of a glory that had nothing to do with sun or fire, but was, perhaps, a ray of the joy there was in Heaven among the angels.

CHAPTER XL.

APART.

OCTOBER was drawing to its close. The leaves no longer rustled under foot, but lay in dismal brown heaps in every sheltered corner. The wind passed, without a sigh, by the bare branches that, a little time before, had bent sweetly and coyly in his embraces. Fires looked cheering and comforting, Hester thought, in the big empty rooms; bigger and emptier than ever, they seemed to her now, for Tom had gone back to London, professedly to be with his mother and sister, really to be with Leaholme; for if it had not been for him, Tom would assuredly have staid with Hester and his step-father, whose love for the gay and pleasant lad had grown deeper a hundred-fold for the earnest, unselfish fellow whom he was pleased and proud now to call his son.

Mr. Bruce had asked Hester if she would go, too, but less even than usual now did she feel inclined for a visit to Mrs. Paley, or a share of the gayety in which Bella seemed to be reveling.

The abbey was still without its master as the winter crept on, and Pollie's continued absence from the rectory made another void for Hester.

A few days after Hester had left her standing with her husband in the sunshine, Pollie had gone home on a visit, so she had sent Hester word in a vague, little letter, in which she begged, with unwonted earnestness, that Hester would write to her and tell her of everybody, because Hugh had so many other things to think of. Hester had written—in all her own anxiety and trouble—pleasant, cheery accounts, if

not very long ones, of everybody; most especially of Hugh himself; whom she saw as often as she could; and who, as she told his little absent wife, seemed "fretting manfully."

But as the October sunshine faded, and the dreary November days crept in among the shadows, there reached Hester a letter with the Aberswys post-mark, and the few blotted lines said only:

"Oh, Hessie, darling! Could you come to me for an hour at the old lodgings here! There is no one in all the world whom I can hope or wish to see but you. If you cannot come, or if you feel you ought not, I shall know that you are tight. But do not tell any one, not any one! POLLIE."

"Uncle Alf," entreated Hester, coaxingly, "may I go and spend one day with Mrs. Delahoyde?"

"But she is away. She is with her mother, is not she? Delahoyde told me she went to her mother in September."

"So she did, uncle. May I go to her for a day?"

"Certainly, dear; to-morrow, if you like, and I will take you over."

"I would rather go to-day, please, Uncle Alf."

"But I cannot leave to-day."

"I don't mind going alone," said Hester, quickly; "I would so like to go to-day!"

"Very well, little Miss Obstinate. Take Ruth, then."

"Must I? Very well, uncle."

Miss Shakespeare had let her rooms at an unhopèd-for time, and an unequally hopèd-for rent; there was no stair-carpet down, and no dog forthcoming; so she was less acid than usual when she received Hester, rather astonished at the arrival alone, in the dusk of the winter afternoon, of the beautiful girl whom she remembered. For Ruth had been sent to the hotel with instructions to get a private room, and a large fire, and everything she wanted, until her young mistress joined her.

The early twilight crept and clung about the stunted elms, as Hester—looking very much at home—sat beside Pollie's bed, where the sad little mother lay and gathered hope and courage from the bright face that hovered over her and her new-born child.

"If you will lie quite still until I have satisfied myself that the baby wonderfully resembles you, or is speakingly like his

father, also until I have had some tea and rested, you shall tell me all about everything."

And Hester rose and moved about the room in her pretty bright dress, exactly as if she had been with mother and child from the first, and had been quietly accustomed to it all. She took a long time over her tea, not allowing Pollie to speak the while; and the wished-for consequence ensued. As Pollie dreamily and happily watched her, she fell into a soft, deep sleep. Then Hester sat quite still before the fire, and tried to think out a very puzzling thought.

The nurse peeped into the room, and went away again to tell Miss Shakespeare that this sleep was just what the poor lady had wanted.

The fire-light shone clearly and steadily out into the darkness of the street, when Pollie opened her eyes upon the pretty, home-like picture of the little watcher at the fire; and, while Hester softly held the hand upon the coverlet, Pollie told her story.

"I must go back a long way, Hessie," she said, "but I will make it as short as I can, for it is a silly and a gloomy tale. When I first went to Lorne House, a girl of fifteen, I was not a teacher, as you knew me, but a pupil; and in those days I got to be rather a favorite with the other girls, especially with one whom you knew afterward, Ella Platt. She was an industrious, serious girl, and very kind to me; and when her father was in London and she went for a holiday, she always got leave for me, too. Very much we used to enjoy those visits, and perhaps I enjoyed them most of all—for I was only a silly girl of sixteen then—because we met there a cousin of Ella's, and he was very fond of being with us, and tried how pleasant he could make those times for me. You know him; you know him now as you would have known him then, for a heartless, unscrupulous man of the world; but I was never so clear-judging, Hessie, and, though you will wonder how any girl could be induced to admire Sir Randal Platt, I did. I did, indeed; *only* admire him though, nothing more! I never had much attention paid me in my life, Hessie. I never was pretty, as you know, and I never could fascinate, as some girls do, without being pretty at all. But at that time, I suppose, I had just the prettiness of youth, and he pretended to like me very much. I was little more than sixteen when Ella left school, and I went home with her for those summer holidays. Sir Randal was there all the time,

and we were together a good deal; for though, as I said, Ella was very kind to me, and my greatest friend, she was a quiet, practical girl like myself, Hessie, and never taught me what it was to love her, as you taught me to love *you*, even when you were but a little child.

“When the time came for my return to school they put me in Sir Randal’s charge, as he said he had to be in London on that day. When we changed trains at Chester, he took our tickets, and we went on very gayly and thoughtlessly together in the express. We were to be in at Paddington at seven, as I had told Miss Berrington in my letter the night before, and I did not think of noticing the time, it passed so merrily. I had but traveled between Chester and London once before, so that the unfamiliarity of the places we passed never struck me. But at last the long summer twilight closed in upon us, and I began to wonder. We were traveling by the longest route, Sir Randal told me when I questioned him. Could I not guess why he had chosen it?

“I am afraid I was a little proud because I could guess, and went chatting on contentedly. Dashing past the village stations went the express, and at last I was really frightened. We were, as we had been all the journey, alone in the carriage, and when we next stopped he said he would go and make inquiries.

“‘Yes, he had made a blunder,’ he explained, laughing, as he came back to the carriage-door. ‘We were at Carlisle. We must make the best of such a laughable little mistake.’

“Girls were not such travelers then as they are now, Hessie; still, I was silly and ignorant not to have known such a blunder could not have been made by such a man. I felt certain it was a mistake of his. I believed him so implicitly that I was as sorry for him as for myself.

“‘What should we do?’ I cried, and the tears came fast in my eyes.

“He tried to comfort and reassure me, saying that, though it was very ridiculous, and he deserved excommunication for being so wandering in his actions as well as in his thoughts, it would be all right; and in the meantime the wisest thing would be to make the best of it.

“So he took me to a hotel and ordered supper, and we were both hungry and enjoyed it. Over and over again I said I ought to go back at once, even if I traveled all night; but

I suppose I rather dreaded the idea in reality, and my words had no effect.

"I was too childish and innocent, Hessie—I was, indeed—for even a suspicion of wrong; and I had learned from Ella to look up to Sir Randal as an honorable, truthful English gentleman.

"So, though it seems horrible to look back upon that evening through which I sat beside him, we were quite cheerful, really, and talked and laughed a good deal over our misadventure. It was not until I was alone in my own room that I felt uncomfortable and unhappy, and longed to be back even at the very hardest lesson I had ever been put to learn, rather than there. I could not touch my breakfast, and waited eagerly for the carriage which was to take us to the station. All my fears vanished when I was in it, and we drove away gayly. Sir Randal tried harder than ever to make it pleasant and enjoyable, and once more, in the summer sunshine, things seemed bright and harmless.

"We drove along. Ah, Hessie! I see you guess it. We were driving out into the country, and when the horses stopped in a grand old wood, he said, lifting me from the carriage, we had missed the early train, and as we had a few hours of compulsory waiting, he thought it would be pleasanter to spend them there than at that gloomy inn.

"I fancied I saw sense in that, and we roamed about happily in the flickering sunshine, and the man who drove us brought us, from the carriage, a dainty little luncheon-basket, which we unpacked under the drooping trees besides the sweetest little brook, I thought, in all the world. Hessie, he managed it so that it was evening again when we prepared to leave. I never can tell how he made the time fly, for I hate to recall any of his false words.

"My fears were wide awake now, and I said I would not go back with him. I would go to London alone, night as it would be. Oh, Hessie, dear, I will not tell you how he tempted me to listen to him. You know him, and you can judge. What was the use, he said, of going back to work and punishment, when we might make life so pleasant? Ah! I wish I had forgotten all his cruel, bad words. He pleaded long, there in the beautiful spot which almost pleaded for him, too, and then he threatened—threatened exposure and disgrace—he to speak to me of disgrace! But I was strong then in my despair; so lonely, so far away from help I seemed,

that that very knowledge gave me strength. I never since have had the courage I had then, child almost that I was. I think if the wind does not always seem tempered, God gives the shorn lamb a little extra courage to bear it, does not He? All through that night I traveled with Sir Randal, closing my ears to every word he uttered, turning from him as I could fancy turning from a reptile.

"Hessie, I shall never forget the moment when the train stopped at Paddington, and I looked out upon Miss Berrington's face. Was it not wonderful that she was there? I know perfectly well that Sir Randal had intended to leave me here (if I insisted upon staying) to go back alone with what story I would. But it was too late now. I hardly know what he said to Miss Berrington, or she to him. I could only cling to her crying with all my might, like the tired, stupid, childish girl I was; but I know he wrote her a long letter of apology and explanation, and I think no one was ever told. Miss Berrington took me back with her, and that was the end of it, until that day—oh, you remember it, Hessie!—when I met him at Aberswys. Ella I have never seen since; she was abroad most of the time until her marriage, and she was not one to cling tenderly to an old friendship, like yourself. That is the far-back story, Hessie; now I must end it quickly. You remember the day I last saw you at the rectory, when Hugh was going to dine at Hereford, where he was to meet Sir Randal Platt, who, I knew, was going abroad the next day—he generally is abroad now, and they whispered strange stories of his doings there. What is the matter, dear? are you so tired of my story? I have nearly finished. Oh, how I longed that Hugh should not go! but what reason could I give him? I knew if he heard where Sir Randal had been, he would begin to talk to Earl Leaholme, and I—I don't know what I dreaded, except for those two to be together. Well, he went, Hessie, and it all happened as I had feared. They talked together of Lord Leaholme and Mr. Lane, and Hugh might have known, from what he said of them, that he could lie. But isn't it true, 'A lie that is half the truth is ever the blackest of lies?' What he told Hugh was half the truth, yet it was the blackest lie of all. Was it really true what he had heard, that Mr. Delahoyde had married Miss Goldsmith, of Birmingham? He was, indeed, surprised—for he should have judged her a most unsuitable wife for a cler-

gyman, a girl who—but, of course, this was in confidence, as the matter had been kindly hushed up and glossed over by a weak, indulgent, old schoolmistress! but—to tell the simple truth, where simple truth was best—a girl who had run away from school to spend a few days with himself at the lakes, and afterward been taken charitably back by the very old lady whom she had so cleverly duped.

“Hugh was long before he believed this, as I fancied afterward; but having once accepted a proof, and let the belief take root, it was rooted forever.

“He came home very, very late that night, Hessie, and when I turned and met his stern eyes, I knew what he had heard.

“Oh, why had not I told him myself, before I took his pure, exacting love! I so often meant—so often tried—as I used to try to tell *you*, dear, in that summer when you and Sir Randal were thrown together. But I never could.

“I think I started back from Hugh before he spoke, and cowered in my chair when he asked me one cold, cruel question. I know I put up my hands to hide his rigid face. Then, when he repeated the question, without another word, I sobbed that it was partly true; but——

“He heard no more; he did not come near me again that night, and in the morning we sat opposite to each other without one word. Oh! he was so white and sad, yet so cold and cruel, and I was afraid of him.

“I tried to speak once or twice, but he awed me with his immovable face. Oh, Hessie! may you never know shame and agony like that! It went on day after day, until I wrote to mother I was coming to see her, and I followed my letter. As I bid Hugh good-bye, I asked him if he had no word to say to me. He said, ‘No; no word at all.’

“So, with a breaking heart I went home, and oh, it *was* hard to prevent their guessing my sorrow! I think I spent my whole night in tears, and my whole days in trying to keep them back. I always came down first, and when mamma and Aunt Phyllis came into the room, I began to tell them something of home and Hugh—little things you told me, Hessie—just to make them think I had had a letter from him, and to prevent the terrible question, ‘Another letter to-day, dear?’ For, of course, no letter ever came from him, though I used to pray so unrestingly and hope so passionately. At last, mother began to fancy I hid my letters because Hugh

pleaded in them to have me home again; and, do you know, Hessie, I was so cowardly that I let that pass. I felt at last that I must fix a time to go, and I did; but I put it off day by day, until they wondered at my conduct, as I could see; and I fixed upon my train, determining not to delay again. Oh, Hessie, when Aunt Phyllis proposed writing to Hugh to come the day before I went, to fetch me, I thought I should choke with my unshed tears of shame and fear! Yet I got away quietly, and bid them quite a cheerful good-bye.

"At the first station, I left that train and took a ticket here, and Miss Shakespeare took me in; and, after one lonely, miserable night, God sent me the little one who was to have come in the happiness of the coming year—my baby, who was to have come in joy and love—who was to have brought such joy and love to my own two homes! Hessie, how your face pities me, darling! My heart was so heavy and sad till you came. What should I have done without you?"

"Just what you must do *with* me, Pollie; just lie still, and nothing more."

The girl's soft voice had a new tone in it, Pollie thought—a tone of infinite tenderness and comfort, but of brave hope, too.

"We women have a great deal of lying still in our lives, haven't we, Pollie? And sometimes we find it very hard to do."

"Hugh was always fond of that idea of Keble's," said Pollie, quietly, "'waiting to see what God will do.' I suppose we ought to like the waiting."

"Yes," answered Hester, gently, "but I think that is hardly *our* idea of waiting; it includes other things, of course. We have no right to fold our hands upon our cross while we say, 'It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good.' We must clasp and bear it. But at present, dear," she added, softly kissing Pollie's wan face, "you are emphatically and in every sense to lie still. In the morning I am going home again; and, Pollie, if it seems still sad and gloomy to you—if it even seems sadder when I am gone—be all the more glad, because it is always at the very darkest that light breaks. Good-night, my dear, my dear!"

She turned again at the door, and went back for another good-bye; left kiss after kiss on Pollie's lips; made a funny little allusion to the baby's total incapacity for giving or re-

ceiving kisses; then went away at last, leaving the nurse inexplicably improved in care and attention.

CHAPTER XLI.

BY THE LAKE SHORE.

NEXT day Hester once more sat with her old governess in the familiar room at Lorne House; sat as long as her train would allow her, for the old lady seemed to like to have her there. She had told a little of Pollie's story, in her old loving way, and Miss Berrington—her spectacles unaccountably dim, and her kind hand shaking—had emptied her private letter-drawers, and hunted out the letter Sir Randal Platt had written to her just fourteen years before. With a few words of deep gratitude, Hester took it, holding it closely in her hand while she staid.

"It explains everything," said the old lady, in a glad voice; "and I am very thankful now that I have such a habit of keeping my letters—letters that are not on business, I mean."

That evening Hester and Ruth reached home again, and found Mr. Bruce away. Next morning Hester left word she was going to stay with Mrs. Delahoyde two days, and ordered the pony carriage. If she drove as far as the ruins at Wye, she could send the carriage back, and walk through the woods to Ruyglan rectory. The walk would do her good, she felt, and she should love to see the old place again, now that it was empty—see it for the last time, perhaps.

She took Tom's key of the fishing-tower in her pocket, and, when she reached the woods, gave the reins to the groom to take the carriage home.

Feeling intensely every sight and sound, she walked on down to the ruins. There was no ripple of the water on the shore; all was still, with a lonely, heavy stillness. Slowly she put the key into the lock of the little iron-nailed door, opened it, and stood with bent head and clasped hands before the narrow, empty fire-place. She had never entered the room since that first day when he had taken them over it, and told them that he felt such a shuddering dislike to the place. Why? It was but a still and quiet spot, after all. She should like to sit here for hours and hours in the solitude, if no duty called her away.

What a rest it would be, the poor tired girl thought, with the weight of pain upon her eyelids. What a rest, if she might stay here for a time alone, undisturbed, unwatched, unspoken to! It would be just the relief she needed.

Ah, little Hester! Do you feel nothing of the damp fog that creeps through the rusty bars and broken windows? nothing of the heavy, moldy chill of the place; nothing of the hopelessness of the deep, silent loneliness here?

As she stood in the gloom and chill of the little room, that one day came back to her vividly. She almost felt Lord Leaholme beside her, laughing, as he spoke of the little cloud across the lake. She felt, more strongly than ever, the consciousness which she had never been without, that he loved her—loved her as no one could ever love again—as she had never deserved to be loved.

“O, God! bless him with happiness, however thou mayest punish me!”

She clasped her hands above her head as she sobbed the words; the face which had brightened that spot before, in its radiant, girlish beauty, so still, and white, and weary now!

Presently Hester turned, the wild, unspoken sorrow of her life surging like a flood upon her brain. The light flickered and threw strange shadows about the little room, but without one thought of fear, Hester mounted the narrow staircase and entered the silent chamber.

There lay a driving-glove upon the floor under the window. Damp and mildewed as it was, she took it up and held it to her cheek for a moment, moved it slowly to her lips, and gave it a shy, gentle kiss. As she did so, something fell from it and lay upon her dress. It was the signet-ring which the earl had lost on that day when she had been there before. She picked it up and read the motto with eager, tearful eyes; then laid it gently down upon the glove.

Standing beside the closely barred window, she looked out across the silent water. Though the chill of the room struck straight to her heart, it was not that which made her shiver so helplessly, as she hastily groped her way down the broken stairs again, and left the house, with a sudden dread and nameless horror of it.

When she had left it nearly a mile behind, she stopped suddenly in her hurried, nervous walk, and tried to remember whether she had locked the door. No—surely no; for she

had no key in her hand, and remembered nothing but that she had hastened from the tower. She turned, vaguely and dreamily wondering why her head pained her so, and would not let her remember.

Yes, there was the key in the door still. It was well that she had turned back. With trembling fingers she turned it in the lock, put it into her pocket, and once more started on her way.

But now the water plashed noisily upon the pebbles; the leaves whirled past her in the woods, and rustled with a sound that seemed to pierce her brain, as she trod among them. The air seemed full of strange, shrill voices, and the ground swayed under her. Claspings her head with both hands, powerless to battle any longer with this new, nervous pain, she threw herself down among the gaunt, cold trees, in the silent wood, and sobbed aloud as if her heart were breaking.

CHAPTER XLII.

BY LITTLE HANDS.

HUGH DELAHOYDE sat alone in his study that evening, stern, and proud, and miserable; miserable with a softer and more remorseful misery than it had been of late, although he was hardly aware of it, yet a misery that had unconsciously increased tenfold since he had been to the abbey to welcome Lord Leaholme home. It had shocked Hugh inexpressibly to find him still so weak, his right arm helpless, and his shoulder paining him acutely. And it surprised him, too, to find that before he had been there long the earl, still thoughtful for others, had read a something wrong with Hugh, and had won him to tell of this trouble which was come into his home.

But Leaholme had not received this tale quite as Hugh expected. He had said no hard words of Sir Randal; no reproachful ones of Pollie; no pitying ones to Hugh himself. He only said—his gray eyes puzzled and perplexed—“I cannot understand this, Delahoyde, so I cannot speak of it. It seems so impossible to me to be hard and unforgiving toward the one in all the world who loves and trusts in you. If I—I am a lonely fellow, Delahoyde, and do not know much

about it, you will say—but if I had a wife as you have, and she loved me as your wife loves you, and had lived with me, as you two have lived together, in close and dear communion, I could not have room in my heart for suspicion and mistrust.”

Hugh began to dissent, but stopped, noticing the weary face, and feeling sure he ought not to bring any harassing thought here. He held out his hand silently.

“I ought not to have spoken to you at all of this. Pardon me, dear, my lord.”

“I am getting better, Delahoyde,” Leaholme answered, cheerily. “Dr. Thurtees—my kind physician, who came with me from Germany—is coming here in a day or two to set me entirely right. I shall soon be among my people again. I am glad you came, for I had just been feeling, with Byron, ‘the solitude of passing my own door without a welcome.’ I little imagined there would be a sorrow in your bright little home, Delahoyde; that is worst of all. It will be but a short one for you both, though, I feel sure, and you will tell me so when you come again. You have so often taught us yourself how unhesitatingly, how unquestioningly, God pardons us, without our faults bearing a word of excuse, that you will be the first one, Delahoyde, to try to do—ever so little—as he does.”

And Hugh had gone back to his gloomy house, feeling for the first time very uncomfortable about his own share in this sad variance. As he tried to make it clear to himself, and to go back to his own hard thoughts, Hester came in to him.

“Mr. Delahoyde,” she said, in her low, gentle voice, “my uncle is away, and I want particularly to go to Aberswys to see an old friend. Would you take me? I cannot bear to go with the servants.”

He started up, willing and anxious to do anything for her, as he had always been; anxious, too, that she should not see how her request had astonished him. Of course Miss Bruce knew that his wife was at home, he felt, and, of course, she knew nothing beyond that.

They walked together to the station, smiling and nodding to the villagers as they passed—their own the two saddest hearts in all Ruyglen.

Old street, Aberswys, Hugh thought, was as much changed from its summer aspect as his own married life. He grew a little pale as Hester stopped at the green door which he

remembered so well, but they were only taken into a shabby little parlor which he had never seen before.

"If you will sit here just for a few minutes, Mr. Delahoyde," Hester said, "I shall be ready."

"Pollie," she began, entering the room up-stairs as if she had never left it, but kissing her as if she had been away a year; "Pollie, have you written to Hugh, as I recommended?"

"I scrawled a line, but I want you to burn it. You know you promised it should not be posted."

"Of course I did, and I always keep my word. Give it me."

"Burn it for me, please," entreated Pollie, and Hester closed her fingers on it.

It was a piteous appeal for forgiveness—for baby's sake—breaking off into a cry for justice; but Hester did not read it. She took the baby tenderly from beside Pollie, and, laughing at the mother's faint expostulations, carried it down to the old drawing-room—where Hugh had spent many a happy hour in that past summer—and laid it on the sofa, with Pollie's written words under its tiny hand. Then, with dim eyes, she closed the door and went down-stairs.

"Mr. Delahoyde," she said, joining him, "I have a few minutes to wait, but cannot unless you will come up-stairs to a warmer room."

"I do not mind at all, Miss Hessie."

"Come, please," and he followed her.

She opened the drawing-room door a little way, standing back as he passed in; then shut it softly.

"Oh, Pollie, Pollie," she whispered, bending a glad face over her, "where do you think baby is?"

"With nurse, I suppose," said Pollie, smiling.

"Yes, with the dearest, kindest nurse that he will ever have—except his mother. Oh, Pollie, baby is in his father's arms!"

Hugh sat with the blurred paper in his hand; his baby, his own little one, his first-born, held to his beating, softened heart. He had sat long so, yet hardly realized it all, when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder, and a happy face bent close to his.

"Pollie is waiting for you," Hester said, a little shyly.

She took the baby from him, and pointed to Pollie's door. His step faltered a little; but when Hester heard Pollie's little

cry of joy, she shut the door upon herself and baby, and sung him to sleep in the most business-like manner.

That night, before Hester went to her room, leaving the husband and wife sitting together happy and united, she gave Hugh Sir Randal's letter.

"I would not give it you before," she explained, a little timidly, "because I knew Pollie would value your return more if it showed trust without proof. And that you yourself would rather look back upon to-night, if all you did had been done straight from your heart. Now it will be better to read it."

And Hugh read it and re-read it, and then—both humbled and ashamed as he was—it became Pollie's turn to comfort and forgive.

And she did it with a great many tears, but they were not melancholy ones at all.

Hester stood at the window, and looked out upon the cheerless scene, while the restless fretting of the waves upon the shore seemed moaning that the summer-time which she and they had known was gone forever. She tried to repeople the place as it was then; bring the dancing sparkle to the waters, and bright faces to the shore. But there was nothing but the chilling darkness and the restless, shuddering wind, and no remembrance would come back to her but the shivering loneliness of that little tower by the lake.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"A SORROW'S CROWN OF SORROW."

"MR. BRUCE," said Hugh, when he brought Hester home on the Saturday night, "I ought to apologize humbly for letting Miss Bruce tire herself for me and mine, but I feel as if I could not, for she has done so much for my wife and baby that I cannot try to speak of it."

Mr. Bruce laughed cheerily.

"Come in to dinner; the task will be easier afterward."

But Hugh declined, hastening away again, as Hester knew he would, and she and her uncle dined alone together again, very cheerfully.

"Any news, uncle?" she asked at last, fearing he heard her heart beat as she asked it.

"No, dear, nothing particular has transpired even in these long two days, which seem to have been so eventful to Delahoyde. Poor fellow! how radiant he is in his new character. I did hear a report that Leaholme had returned; but, of course, it is a mistake, as Tom was to have come down with him. I wish he would come; I think he will be better here. Your aunt and Bella did not see him in town, as he was not well enough to be about, and Tom tells me that when he made that splendid speech the other night in the House (which I put away for you to read), they were whispering in the gallery that it was a case of Lord Chatham over again. I should have been afraid so, too, if I had been there. Your aunt was vexed that she was not. Oh, by the bye, they are on their way home, Hessie—staying a day or two with the Dyotts. They bring Lydia back with them to stay over the wedding. Of course Hemming comes, too. It is to be on the last Thursday in November. There, dear, that is all the news, I think. Oh, no, I forgot the principal item. They are bringing you your bridesmaid's dress all complete, as it is supposed."

"At your request, I suppose, uncle?"

"Well, as the bridesmaids seemed to be allowed no choice in the affair, I thought they need not have any trouble."

"Thank you, Uncle Alf. And—and Tom."

"Oh, Tom I am expecting daily. He is to be at his post in December. That, I believe, decided them about the wedding day. The Hemmings are all coming down here for it. There are plenty of them, and all very imposing. That is all."

That was all! Hester crept out, and lingered in the chill, night air, dreading the empty drawing-room. The whole sky was black with clouds, except just where, above the river, the crescent moon was setting. So dark it was that she would not have known there was a river at all, but for just one little golden ripple where the reflection played; and now and then a lightning sheet flashed out upon the darkness.

There was nothing more for her to hear now. There would be nothing more, perhaps, for her to hear forever, save the gay particulars of Bella's wedding, and other spiritless, soulless things in which her heart's deep, aching wishes could have no part. Hester checked the thought as quickly as she could. Never, if she could prevent it, should her heart grow

thankless and unsympathizing, and her life without an aim.

"O God, who hast given me so much," she cried, "give me patience through this thy punishment, and faith to look beyond it! If my heart grows dark and cold, let thy love break and brighten it as thy light seems to pierce this gloomy night, straight out from heaven."

She turned in slowly, and opened the piano in the great, empty drawing-room; but the first notes she struck touched some inner chord, and made it vibrate sadly. She leaned her elbows on the music-desk before her, and covered her face, feeling how she had made a wailing discord of her life—and of his.

"If he had never loved me," she moaned in her thoughts, "if he had never loved me, we might both be happy now. And yet I cannot wish it. I cannot even wish that he had never taught me to love *him*."

"Why, Hessie, dear, playing with your elbows!"

She raised her head hurriedly, and her uncle looked at her, surprised.

"How is this, my child? I never saw such a woful little face. Of what are you thinking, here alone?"

"I was just beginning to think, Uncle Alf," she answered, slowly, the little wan face brightening at his coming, "that Dante—and then, of course, Tennyson and Longfellow—made a mistake about 'a sorrow's crown of sorrow.'"

"Why, what is it they say? Something, isn't it, to the effect that a sorrow's crown of sorrow is the remembrance of happier things, or times, or something?"

"Something to that effect, yes, uncle," she said, smiling; "you don't remember the words very exactly."

"Not I. And you think poor ignorant little Alighieri originated a mistake, which his successors have blindly followed, do you, little wiseacre?"

"Yes, I think that a sorrow's crown of sorrow must be remembering dreary things, which we *might* have made happy if we had been good and wise, remembering them when it is too late; don't you, uncle?"

"I will tell you, dear, when I am suffering from remorse. You will understand it better when you are doing so, too. Play for me, now, a bit of Mozart, and don't slip into Beethoven as you generally do."

"I like him better, uncle—on the piano," said Hester, loitering over her music, and dreading to begin.

So long she was, that the tea came in in time to prevent her; and that was only just over when the station fly once more brought Tom home—so gentle and pleasant, that he seemed to bring a whole houseful of sunshine in for Hester. They all had another tea together, and an hour's pleasant chat. Then Mr. Bruce went to his study, and Tom and Hester drew nearer to the fire, and talked together of his new life, and new ambition.

"I stay at home now until after the wedding," he said, "and first I must go and see Leaholme. Has he been here since he came down to the abbey?"

"He isn't come to the abbey, Tom."

"Yes, dear, he came on Thursday. I traveled with him part of the way. I shall go over after service in the morning. I want to thank him, here at home, more earnestly and sensibly than I have ever been able to do."

"Lord Leaholme is not at Wye, Tom, really; Uncle Alf says so," replied Hester, wonderingly.

"You will see, dear," smiled Tom. "You will see him at church in the morning, perhaps, but you must be prepared to see him greatly changed, dear; and his right arm—what! going already?"

"It is very late, Tom!"

"Darling," he said, looking anxiously into her face, "I wish I could see the old roses back which I scared with my—profligacy. I sometimes can hardly believe you have forgiven me, Hessie—or that he has."

"Do you know, Tom," she answered, very softly, "I was thinking only to-night how very differently I and—he—forgive. How nobly he has been forgiving all his life—how meanly and weakly I have tried. *That* made the difference, Tom—he never had to try at all. *That* made the difference."

"Hush, dear! Think what you have forgiven me, and——"

"Tom, you promised me you would not mock me by saying that again. Oh, if you knew how it hurt me!"

"I never will. Good-night, my little good angel. You have been too much alone lately. I shall not go to Wye to-morrow, after all. I wish Leaholme would come home with us instead."

"Uncle Alf is going to Rebbington church in the morning."

"Is he? then I *certainly* cannot leave you. I will beg Earl Leaholme to come with us to lunch. You will not look so tired then, my dear."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE KEY OF THE FISHING TOWER.

THE old roses were back—they were very soft pink roses at any time—and the big, dark eyes were full of hope and happiness next morning, when Hester made Tom halt in the village to speak to little Hester Moore and her mother.

"How gay she looks, Anna!" exclaimed Hester, with the child in her arms. "Are you going to take this atom to church with you?"

"No, 'm. Ezra's gone to church this morning; but his lordship said, when he passed on Thursday, that he would call in and see how Hetty grew, as he went to church this morning. So I dressed her, expecting him; but he's left the abbey again now, I hear, 'm."

"Left again?" echoed Tom, as Hester bent her head upon the baby's.

"Yes, sir, so they say. I thought he was at Churleigh, maybe, till Ruth and James called in just now. I suppose he's gone on a bit of a visit. I don't think evil, as Ezra always does, poor lad, when he can't quite follow a thing."

"What does Ezra say?" asked Hester, in a low, strange voice.

"He says, 'm—but then, he's very silly at times is Ezra"—! answered Anna, checking herself with a quick, curious look into Hester's face, "he says all sorts of rubbish."

"I suppose he has seen a ghost, or heard one," laughed Tom.

"That's exactly what he pretends, sir; he says he saw a white ghost beckon to him among the ruins down by the lake, as he came home the other side it last night. No wonder, either, I say, because he oughtn't to have been there. And I should think it was his conscience," added his wife, rather sharply, as Tom guessed why poor Ezra's conscience should

have been pricking him—or beckoning to him, as Anna represented.

“I dare say it was,” said Tom, pleasantly. “What a good thing, though, that his conscience is white, if it must haunt him!”

“Haunt him it did, sir, indeed; and kept on so haunting him that he was wretched company; and this morning I got him to promise to go straight and tell the master. The parsons know how to explain those sort of things away, sir, and it’ll make Ezra a bit ashamed.”

“We will call as we go back, Anna, and hear the explanation,” said Hester, quietly. “Now, Tom, the bells have stopped.”

But though they had done so, the service had not begun; nor did it begin until Tom had looked at his watch three times, and shown Hester, at the last, that it was a quarter past eleven.

Then Mr. Ferriman walked up the aisle alone, and performed the service nervously. But no tall, handsome head stood alone under the marble tablets, and those of the congregation who had gone on purpose to see it settled in their seats discontentedly and fretfully muttered the responses with their lips alone.

Hester did not call in at Ezra’s cottage as she passed. Anna was standing at the door, looking for her husband, whose dinner, she said, was spoiling. After that Hester walked on beside Tom rather quietly.

They had just reached home, and were standing at the drawing-room fire together, when Hugh Delahoyde walked straight into the room, hurried and nervous, despite the quietness he assumed in Hester’s presence.

“Mr. Lane,” he began, turning to Tom, almost before his greeting was over, “will you lend me the key you possess of that fishing-tower in the park at Wye?”

“Certainly; though it looks bad for the rector to be seen fishing on a Sunday morning: weak, too, at this time of year.”

But Hugh had no smile in answer.

“I want you to come with me, too, if you will,” he said.

“With pleasure; stay one moment.”

He went into the study where the key was kept, and came back examining it curiously. “How is this, I wonder?” he said, in a tone of real astonishment. “This is Lord Leatholme’s key. Who can have had mine?”

"I had it, Tom," replied Hester; "I had yours on Friday. I went to the tower myself, but I brought the key back, and that is it."

"Not a bit of it, dear; this is Leaholme's own key. Look; the title is engraved on the ring."

"Yes, I see," said Hester, as she read it; "you must have exchanged, some time, you see."

"No; I left my own in the study here, I am sure."

"Do not wait, please," interrupted Hugh, anxiously; "would you mind driving over with me now?"

Tom went at once to put on his coat and hat.

"Miss Hester," said Hugh, suddenly, "try—for Heaven's sake, try—to tell me how the key was changed. Tell me exactly what you did the day you were there."

She told him the simple fact of having forgotten the key; there was little else that she either remembered or could have told.

"You are sure you had left the key in the door?" he asked.

"Of course, I must have done so. Did I not find it in the key-hole?"

"I do not know."

"But how else could it have been?" she asked, unable to follow him.

"I cannot tell yet, Miss Bruce; please think nothing of it," said Hugh, in sudden pity for the girl who, since the night he first saw her on the sea-shore, had always seemed to him one from whom gloom and sorrow should be far removed.

Ah! Hugh little guessed the anguish that the loving heart had already borne, and had still to bear!

"Now, Delahoyde, I am ready," said Tom, coming in to bid Hester good-bye. And they were gone before she had recovered from her bewilderment.

CHAPTER XLV.

HOW THE DOOR WAS LOCKED.

HESTER went to the little school-house in the park, and told the children to read to her. They read to her of things she had a vague and dreamy consciousness of having heard before, and she smiled as they finished, and dismissed them; kissed one little old-fashioned face; lifted a lame boy over the

stille; then ran home again, rapidly as the very youngest child there could have run.

No, Mr. Lane had not returned, James told her; but a messenger had arrived half an hour ago, and the master had set off for Wye immediately, on horseback.

There was no fixed purpose in Hester's mind; she only knew that the agony of staying in the empty house would be more than she could bear; so she walked on quickly through the park, and out into the highroad. We hardly know how far or fast we walk when the road is straight, and our one intense longing lies before us, and a lonely, dreary dread behind. So Hester never thought of the long miles she walked, in her eager unrest, as the twilight faded.

She never noticed that the bells were not ringing their usual Sunday evening chime; she had almost forgotten what day it was. She never hesitated for a moment until she found herself at the west lodge of the abbey; then she stopped for a moment, tottering feebly. No one was about at the pretty little cottage. She tried the door, but it was locked; so she passed on up the grand old avenue, along which she and Tom had driven on that evening when she had dashed her cup of happiness to the ground with her own passionate hand. It was all so still in the dying light that the deer among the fern far off started at her quiet footstep before she could even see them. As she came in sight of the great, silent house, two gentlemen came through the doorway out upon the broad, white terrace steps. One, who was a stranger to her, spoke a few words and turned back into the house. The other came toward her, astonished.

"Uncle, oh, uncle, tell me!" she whispered, breathlessly, clasping his arm.

"Hessie, dear, why are you here, my child?"

"Uncle, I must know what I have done."

But he could tell her nothing; he was obliged to break off, even in his rebuke to her for being there.

"Stop, I will send Tom," he said, suddenly.

And while she stood upon the steps, leaning for support against one of the pillars, Hugh Delahoyde came out to her and gently gave her his arm.

"We must walk to the yard," he said, "if you can, Miss Bruce—not to bring the carriage round upon the gravel; the wheels make such a noise."

"Mr. Delahoyde," began Hester, with an intense effort, "I can't get Uncle Alf to tell me what is the matter."

"This evening has unmanned him, Miss Hessie. He loves Lord Leaholme more, if possible, than we do."

"Where is Lord Leaholme?"

"He lies up there, very, very ill."

Poor Hugh's voice was faltering, and his effort not to alarm her was a vain one.

"Where was he?"

"In—in the little upper room in the tower."

Hester's fingers closed with a sharp grip on Hugh's hand, and her eyes grew darker and darker as they pierced his.

"Go on! go on!—or—I shall die!"

And he felt that any hesitation on his part would be worse to her than the truth.

"He was locked in, and in his weakness and with his wounded arm he was helpless to summon aid—even if aid was within reach. He tied his handkerchief to the iron bars of the window, and Ezra saw it, and was afraid, and came to me. When I found it I came to you (as you know) for the key. That was Earl Leaholme's key. Mr. Lane's—the one you had used—was picked up to-day in the wood, where you must have dropped it. When you went back, Lord Leaholme had gone in; and it was two days afterward that we found—oh, Miss Hessie! can you hear me?"

No. Not a sound; the wide eyes could not even *see* him. He put his arms round her, but she did not stir, or lean upon him in the slightest. It was not until Tom came that they could get her to go round to the carriage. When she did, she walked beside them, very still and slow; motioned them away as she took her seat, and was driven home alone in the haunted darkness.

CHAPTER XLVI.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

THOSE days of fear and waiting dragged by wearily. Mrs. Bruce and Bella were at home again, and brought Mr. Hemming and Lydia with them. Bella's great excitement about her approaching wedding almost gave place to another excitement now. She talked hour after hour of Lord Leaholme's

illness, and cried so noisily sometimes that even poor Mr. Hemming found it impossible to soothe and quiet her.

And through these long, long days Hester lived in a restless solitude, only hanging on every word she heard, and hiding the pain and penitence of her own heart. She almost lived out-of-doors; for the atmosphere of the house oppressed her, and, when she could, she wandered along the road toward Wye—always hoping for Tom to come. Morning, noon, or night that hope would take her into the broad, silent road, whenever she could slip away alone.

She had wandered a long way, one chill, bleak afternoon, when she met Hugh, walking slowly. Hester, who had her own thoughtful, self-forgetting nature through all, noticed his weariness, and gently begged him to rest at Churleigh, and he could be driven back.

"No; I will not come on now, Miss Bruce," he answered, quietly; "I only wished to see you. We—we think you are lonely and sad now; and as Pollie cannot come, she will be happier if I can tell her of you."

"Thank you," spoke Hester, softly. "Pollie is always kind. Have you come from Wye?"

"Yes, and am going back. Mr. Lane is coming home for to-night."

"Then how is Lord Leaholme now?"

"Just the same, I think, though Dr. Thurtees fancies his strength daily more exhausted. I think that is a mistake, as well as what he told me to-day: the other physicians never said it."

"What does Dr. Thurtees think?" asked Hester, slowly.

"That what Earl Leaholme most needs is the wish and desire to get well, and the consequent effort. It is impossible; for he is such a brave, unselfish man, that he would make the effort if he could, justly valuing God's gift of life and health."

"He does not seem to—wish to—get—well——"

"I did not say so. Only Dr. Thurtees fancied—not exactly what you say, Miss Bruce—but that Lord Leaholme has not pleasure enough in his life to tempt him back to it with sufficient *power* in the longing. Do you understand?"

"Yes. What sort of pleasure?"

"I hardly know—love and sympathy, I should fancy, Dr. Thurtees means. Surely he has every other pleasure in the

life he leads. Such an earnest life!" Hugh went on, sadly, "a life of chivalrous hopes and noble aims; a life of high endeavors and fearless acts; yet—like that of the Master whom he loves—a life of brave and true humility."

"And you think——"

"I think there is very little change day after day. Yet I think" (the quiet, gentle voice trembled, though—looking straight along the road as he spoke—he never guessed the agony his words brought into the beautiful pale face beside him), "I think he must be 'entering within the borders of peace and rest.' We ought not to grieve, and wish it otherwise," added Hugh, the tears falling from his eyes, as he tried to lean upon his simple faith, "but it is hard to help it. He is so patient—so more than patient; so brave and comforting, even in his utter weakness—if you can understand. Do you know, Miss Bruce, that it is the most touching sight to see him and your cousin together? Mr. Lane is so wonderfully, girlishly tender; and Lord Leaholme, watching his loving care, looks a little like his old self. He is only allowed to speak a few words now and then, but even those Mr. Lane can hardly bear. I see him creep away," added Hugh, with a gulp, "and in the darkness I have often heard him sob as if his heart were breaking."

They walked together in silence for a time; then Hugh, wiping his eyes quietly, spoke again with a vain effort to be cheerful.

"I came to try to cheer you, Miss Bruce, as well as to tell Pollie of you; and see how I have done it! But, indeed, in all our fear, we must know that it is all joy for him, for through the gates of death—which seem open to him—he, we know, can see the throne of God."

Poor Hugh remembered for long afterward how strangely Hester had bidden him good-bye; with what an absent quietness she had spoken to him, sending a loving message to Pollie, and thanking him for coming to her. And through all his lonely walk he saw the wistful face, and the wide, yearning eyes which he had left in the lonely road, waiting—as he guessed, until Tom should come.

When Tom came at last, she stood before him, looking into his face with intense eagerness, but asking no question.

So strangely gentle she was to him always now—so tenderly, so lovingly thoughtful; so accustomed to put away her own

thoughts when he came—that this new look on the beautiful, pleading face to-night frightened him.

“Hessie, darling,” he said, one slight, tremulous hand on each of her shoulders, “what is the longing in your eyes?”

“To see him.”

She said no more, but the beseeching gaze brought a tearful answer:

“Yes, dear; to-morrow.”

Most of that night Hester sat up, trying to gather strength and patience for any trouble that might be coming.

At last the dawn crept slowly down the hill; the bright little roses in the sheltered corner outside her window looked up, rejoicing in the light. Everything forgot, in its morning strength and promise, that there would come the drooping sigh at even-tide, and the weary wish that the work were over with the day.

The sun had risen coldly and brightly, and Hester stood at her window repeating a few lines which had stolen into her head.

“I think the old Abbot at Hirschau says them,” she whispered to herself, “but I am not sure, though the words themselves have lived so in my memory:

“ ‘Upward steals the life of man,
As the sunshine from the wall,
From the wall into the sky,
From the roof along the spire:
Ah! the souls of those that die,
Are but sunbeams lifted higher.’ ”

I suppose they are; but though the sunbeam, I suppose, would be the brighter there, it is very gloomy for us here among the heavy shadows.”

When Hester entered the breakfast-room, Bella was crying bitterly, Mr. Hemming trying, as usual, to console her, telling her (what she knew quite well) that, though the morning tidings from the abbey were not better, still they were not worse. Lydia was crying for sympathy; Mrs. Bruce was very quietly pouring out the tea—for prayers had been dispensed with on account of Bella’s tears—and Mr. Bruce was slowly walking about the room, anxious and troubled.

“Uncle Alf,” said Hester, her low, clear voice startling them all a little, “Tom is going back to the abbey. May I go with him?”

"Why, dear?"

"Because I—— Oh, Uncle Alf, I *must* see Lord Leaholme!"

The words came with a low cry of unutterable pain, and Mr. Bruce looked down quickly. Then he kissed her softly.

"Yes, dear, you shall go—with Tom."

Bella, forgetting her own grief, stared uncomprehendingly. Mrs. Bruce coldly asked her what was the matter.

"Give the child a cup of tea, Isabel," said Mr. Bruce, in a quiet tone, which stopped further questioning.

Hester went up to the table and took the cup from Mr. Hemming as he passed it to her, but when she put her white, shivering lips to it she could not drink, and turned away with a wan little smile.

"Cannot you take your breakfast, Hessie?" asked Mrs. Bruce, significantly.

"It is only a hindrance, is it, Hessie?" said her uncle, kindly. "So Tom thinks, too. Here he is—waiting, you see. I believe he forgets all about his meals, now. Hemming, just bring a cloak or two out here. All right, James, you may go."

Hester knew why he sent the servants away, and it made her "Thank you, uncle!" all the more heart-felt as she kissed him on the steps.

"'Thank you,' indeed!" he muttered, watching the two sad young faces, as Tom and Hester drove away. "She would say it if her heart were breaking—as I believe it is to-day. Poor Leaholme! his is just the heart to win her love, and hers is just such love as he deserves to win. Poor little darling!"

Neither Tom nor Hester spoke all through that drive, but as they turned into the bare, silent avenue at Wye, he turned, and, stooping from his high seat, kissed her very quietly.

The great house looked gloomy and deserted in the winter morning. No sound or sign of active, busy life was there without; no warmth or brightness. But when Hester entered the high, arched hall, and stood among the plants and statues, the gorgeous colors from the great stained window fell around her and upon her with a beauty both warm and bright. She passed the organ without daring to look at it, and went slowly up the broad stairs, her face almost as still as the pictured ones above and beside her.

Tom stopped her at a door on the first wide gallery, and passed it himself alone. Presently he joined her again and took from her her hat and cloak, giving them to the house-keeper, who had quietly followed her up-stairs. Then—in her pretty bright dress, the rich curls hanging from the high cluster of plaits, just the dainty little figure of the old Aberswys day, save from one look on the beautiful young face which told of its having known some deep, unspoken tribulation different from all the other sorrows of her sad youth—she noiselessly entered a long, grand, glittering room.

Here the physicians stood, Hugh with them, looking from the window with his back to her.

Tom spoke to Dr. Thurtees, who turned and bowed gravely as he took her hand; then held it in his own a minute as if testing its strength and calmness.

“It is a chance,” he said to Tom, “and we have no other. Let us at least try it. Gentlemen, if you consent, we may as well go down-stairs for a time.”

They passed out with Hugh, who still could not trust himself to look into her face, and Tom moved on to another door.

“Hessie,” he whispered, his fingers on the handle, “you are sure you wish it? If not, it will but give him greater pain.”

“It is the only thing I do wish, Tom.”

“God bless you, dear!”

He opened the door noiselessly as he spoke, and she passed on alone into the shaded, silent room beyond.

CHAPTER XLVII.

FINDING THE RING.

THERE was no faltering in the quiet step as it entered the grand and stately room; and beside the couch at the fire Hester stood and looked down upon the pale, lined face asleep upon the pillows—the face so well remembered, so dearly loved. She knelt down, her head resting on her clasped hands just on a level with his, and in the silence he opened his eyes slowly; opened them upon a story of love which, months ago, he would have read in a moment and without one word.

"Hessie," he said, in a voice so quiet, so far away from all surprise that it seemed to stop the beating of her heart.

Her hands were dropped, and her face fell upon them.

"Hessie, are you come to me at last?"

But even *his* words could not reach her, in her intense and silent prayer. There was a little pause before he spoke again.

"Look up, my dear one. Is it a dream? Ah, I have dreamed this so often!"

She raised her eyes to his with a wistful longing; yet still she could not speak.

"The dear face of which I have been dreaming is changed," he said. "Have *you* had any pain to bear, my child?"

"Oh, *such* a pain!" she cried, breathlessly.

"Hessie, you do not blame yourself for—for anything you have said to me?" he asked, struggling to speak firmly and cheerfully.

"My pain," she whispered, "has been a greater, deeper one than you could ever know, because I caused it by my own sin."

"How have you sinned?" The few low words betrayed a tremble in his voice, which was not weakness.

Hester's whispered answer was very distinct in the perfect silence. "I took God's justice into my own hands; and while He himself had punished, I blindly tried to punish too. And while I tried, the bitter pain I gave fell—on my own heart."

"Tell me how, Hessie," he said, quietly and soothingly, and speaking as if it were quite natural to have her there; or (as she felt when she looked at him) with no strength or power to be surprised, there, on the threshold of eternity; there, with the light upon his face of that unutterable glory which must be dawning. Once more Hester clasped her hands together, so tightly that the marks remained through many days; and her breath came quickly as she tried to begin. She heard the old tender voice, "Do not tell me if it pains you, dear one," and that broke down her trembling hesitation. In pitifully broken words she told him the story of her life, and of its great mistake.

"There was no sound nor movement until she ended with the few low, hopeless words, "And I knew my punishment was just."

Then he asked, slowly, "What punishment?"

She had expected that he would understand, guessing how he had taught himself to understand her long ago; but,

though her cheeks flushed, she said, with a truthful, earnest simplicity: "In my blindness I had tried to prevent you from loving me; and through all my bitter repentance I felt that you *had* done so."

He had risen a little, even in his weakness, and was looking down upon her with unspeakable joy and tenderness.

"Hessie, Hessie," he murmured, "this is not pity, not compassion. This is love—love come at last. I shall not let you go again, my dear, dear love!"

She rose and took his throbbing head upon her shoulder, listening with full eyes to the soft, low voice, which was failing fast, as he whispered loving, grateful words.

"My own at last! and I have lain here in the night, feeling glad in all my pain because you had not had *this* love to bear; because you had not known the one grief which you had given me; because you would not sorrow deeply when—my pain shall cease—as you would have sorrowed if—if I had won the love I sought. Yet, now that my blessing is sent to me, I am too selfish to say it was best before."

"Nothing can ever be so hard to me," whispered Hester, stroking the thick, dark hair, "as not having told you of this strong, undying love of mine."

"Undying!" he murmured. "Strong and everlasting! I can see it in your eyes, my darling. So long ago I learned to read the little truthful face!"

"A wicked, angry face it used to be," she said, the tears starting at last.

"Very angry sometimes," he answered, gently; "but only to me; never to others. How hard it was to understand you, Hessie! Yet I never gave up all hope, treat me as you would, until the night Tom told me——"

"Oh, hush!" she sobbed; "*I* dare not think of my own mistakes and blindness; now that I have learned to understand you."

"Who taught you to understand me, Hessie?"

"Perhaps Tom, perhaps myself, perhaps—you."

He raised her face with his left hand, for she was trying to hide her tears.

"I was right, you see, after all, my little queen; it was not indifference. I knew it even on the miserable day when—what a sad little face!—I was going to say, when we fought over croquet."

"And I tried so hard to think it was," she answered, with a faint smile.

"Shall I let you go this time, my beloved?"

She laid her face against his pillows, and he put his arm round her.

"It is a weak protection," he said, sadly, as he looked down on his right hand, helplessly in its sling, "but it can never let you go again, my cherished one."

"Never," she answered, with a brave, bright smile. "A weak protection, if you like, but my chosen rest and home."

"How I used to pray and long for that!" he said, softly; "then how I tried to be brave in losing you, Hessie, my child, my love! How fully and mercifully my prayer is answered now! Look up, my own," he whispered, raising her face. And for the first time their lips met.

"Hessie," he said, his full eyes looking far down into hers, "it is harder to be 'thankful for all God takes away,' than 'humbled by all He gives.' I feel so proud now in my gladness; I cannot help it."

"But all this is not right," said Hester, fighting with her tears, as she noticed once more how white and wasted was the face above her. "I really must go."

"No, not yet; but even that would make no difference. Do you not know that you will be now forever in my sight, Hessie?"

She was placing the cushions for him; and as he lay back, weary, in spite of the dazzling brightness in his eyes, he looked up, gently detaining her.

"Hessie, the cloud I saw across the river, as we stood in the abbey ruins, has passed, and left my sky a brilliant blue. Do you remember, dear one?"

"Oh, hush!" she cried, her face full of pain. "I have so thought of it. My hand it was, you know—my hand that—that left you there. That one thought will be a life-long punishment."

"My darling, such an unconscious deed needs no punishment. This tiny hand, was it?" he asked, holding it to his lips, "this dear little hand, which is my own? Shall I tell you what I dreamed down there in the dark and loneliness, Hessie?"

"N-o-o," she whispered, "I cannot bear it. Why were you there at all?"

"I was not trespassing, Miss Bruce," he answered, with a tired smile, "so I am not to be called to account by somebody who *was* trespassing."

"But really, why were you there?" she pleaded, too sadly earnest to return his smile.

"I had been sitting here alone all day, not very well, nor very—brilliant," he said, slowly, "and Delahoyde called and told me he was in trouble; but you know what he told me, for I have heard your part in that happy reunion; and when he was gone, I grew still more lonely—thinking and restless, too—and strayed down to the river, following it unconsciously as I recalled (as I have done so many and many a time) the day—that one sunny day—when you came to Wye. Dear, don't look grieved; no memory of you was ever bitter to me, even then, and do you think it can be so *now*? I went into the old fishing tower and sauntered up-stairs. I suppose I was ill at ease; I know the pain in my shoulder was very acute, and I tried to rest there. It must have been for but a little time, yet when I went down I found the door locked. At first I never imagined this would signify; I have not been accustomed to feel easily baffled, and I forgot my helplessness. When, at last, I found out how utterly incapable I was, I still fancied some of my people would find me. So I rested, little guessing how comfortable they were in the idea that I was at Churleigh. It was next morning that I tied my handkerchief to one of the window bars—the ghostly flag which, they tell me, frightened poor Ezra, and sent him for clerical aid. After I had hung out my signal, I forget what I did. I do not know more, until I awoke here in my own room, with Delahoyde's kind face above me, and Tom's dear voice of gratitude in my ear—a little foretaste, darling, of the perfect happiness that was to follow."

"Are you really happy?" asked Hester, with a long, wistful gaze into his white face, as she stood opposite him, very still and quiet.

"That question is below your usual intelligence," he answered, turning from her pleading eyes, as if he could not trust himself to read their love and fear. "Hessie, what do you think I found in the fishing-tower?"

"I know," she whispered, looking down upon the ring—on the middle finger now of his right hand—and touching it softly and caressingly.

"Yes. I found it there, my darling; and I have a fancy I shall never lose it again. Ha! here is Tom."

He came in quietly, and looked at them with rather a quizzical glance. Just the loving, pleasant Tom of old, but with a new thoughtfulness upon his fair young face, and a new earnestness in his gay young voice.

"She has quite tired you, Leaholme," he said, the words quivering a little as he laid his hand fondly on Hester's. "I always thought she would, but I dared not lock her out. She is a very obstinate little lady when she does not have her own way."

"Tom," Leaholme whispered, as Tom bent to catch the low words, "you will not let her weary herself with me. Take her to ride and walk. I may not have the power to say this presently. Tom, dear fellow, do not let me be selfish, and keep her beside me day and night, because she is willing to stay, and because I love to see her."

"I shall allow her admission very rarely," returned Tom, lightly; "that is to say, if she takes any notice of my permission—the probability of which I feel inclined to doubt."

In the quiet room that evening the earl lay on his wide, low couch; the cheery glow of the fire lighting up his white face, deepening its look of earnest thankfulness, and adding to the wondrous brightness of his dark, glad eyes. Mr. Bruce, leaning forward on his seat, listened to the low, half-whispered request:

"Hessie," he said, starting as if relieved, when she came in to them, and hastily drawing his hand across his eyes, "do you know Leaholme wants me to give him my little favorite? Am I obliged to do so?"

"Not—if you object."

"I object. Now what is to be done?"

"You must wait till I am twenty-one, my lord," said Hester, gravely. "I can do what I like then."

"Take her, Leaholme," spoke Mr. Bruce, earnestly; "to no one else could I give her so willingly and happily."

"Thank you, uncle," whispered Hester, answering Leaholme's bright and loving smile. "To no one else would I ever have asked you to give me."

Mr. Bruce left the firelit room with a picture in his mind which for long was ineffaceable—a picture that was bright with a strange, steady brightness, yet a picture which had

brought that anxious fear upon his face as he stood in the great hall at Wye while his carriage waited.

"But there is hope? Surely you think now that there is hope?" he asked the physician, who was pacing slowly to and fro.

"Yes, there is hope," he returned, cautiously and gently answering the hurried inquiry. "There is cause for hope now as there has not been before. There will be an incentive to get well, a desired impetus; but there is so much pain, and so little strength to bear it, that I cannot help fearing that I am wrong to let you encourage any hope at all. This sudden happiness *may* do him harm instead of good. We can but wait and see."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

"I SHALL BE SATISFIED."

It was Sunday morning, and the Ruyglen bells pealed out their call to service. Mr. Bruce kissed his little boys (who had been sent for home from a few days), and put them into the carriage, telling them to take care of their mother. But, try as he would to avoid their ceaseless question, "When should they see Hessie?" he found it impossible to put them off.

"I will bring you word to-day, when I come back."

"Are you going now, and not coming to church, sir?" asked Mr. Hemming, leaning from his seat.

"Yes, I am going now," Mr. Bruce answered, in a quiet tone, which made his wife turn suddenly.

"Alfred, is the earl worse?"

"How can I tell, my dear, until I go and see? Now, little ones, sit still in your seats."

"But do take us, papa."

"Not to-day, dear little fellows."

"Come, who is going to take papa's place?" interposed Mrs. Bruce, with unusual thoughtfulness. "Are you little boys going to quite tire him before he starts? Besides, you are to take care of us, you know."

They sat down, quietly and gravely. Mr. Bruce settled his wife's wraps, promised Bella and Lydia to be home soon,

nodded pleasantly to Mr. Hemming, kissed his hand to Alf and Wattie, and turned to walk slowly to the abbey, that haunting picture of the happy, weary face—so changed from the dauntless face of old—still most distinct of all before his eyes.

In the bright, frail winter sunshine, Leaholme sat propped upon his pillows, as the chimes crept softly into the grand still room.

Only once before had Hester heard the Ruyglen peal from the old abbey—only once; and though the notes might be the same, to her there was a deeper, truer lesson in the tone to-day. On that January afternoon, when she had first heard these bells, their story had rolled over the bright, frosty landscape to a gay and merry crowd of listeners. On this calm Sunday morning, its message floated along the faded autumn scene, and the listeners—only two—were very still and silent. Yet as Hester sat beside Lord Leaholme, his hand between her own, she knew the soft peal echoing in the lofty room had whispered to her heart a glorious promise even then; and that now it rang for her in a melody most full and most complete.

“Hessie,” he said, presently, looking down upon her thoughtful face, “I wonder whether we shall ever have a marriage peal?”

“Why—not?” she asked, with a sudden flash of pain in her eyes.

“Because if it is to be in our home up there—we shall not care about the bells, perhaps. My love, my dear, dear love, I feel as if *that*—our wedding peal from the old church which I loved so well—could hardly bring us nearer to each other than we are to-day.”

He looked longing at the downcast head, as she did not answer.

“Little wife”—he said it low and wistfully, but she could not look up—“little wife, almost as truly as if we had stood together at God’s altar, have you no word to say to me?”

She looked up at last, and something in his face shamed away her momentary shyness.

“Oh, my love,” she whispered, “there is nothing that can bring us nearer to each other than we stand to-day—now—heart to heart.”

“Yes—heart to heart.”

And then there was a long pause, no voice but the distant, softened one of the bells breaking the silence. That at last

died lingeringly in the Sunday hush; and in his place Hugh rose and read to the grave-faced, anxious congregation, whose thoughts would wander to the grand, sad house, where the master whom they loved lay ill.

Mr. Bruce walked over the decaying leaves in the great Wye woods, thoughtfully and very slowly, almost as if he feared the end of his walk. And Tom sat in one of the great stained windows on the abbey staircase, the rich colors throwing a warm flush on his fair hair, and painting fantastically the open book upon his knee, into which he had never glanced.

And at the window in the long, bright room beyond Hester still sat on her low seat beside the couch.

"Douglas," she said, "something has taken my thoughts back so vividly to-day to that first Sunday in Aberswys, when I dared not listen to your playing, for fear——"

"Never mind it, darling," he answered, gently touching the sad little face. "We are at rest together now, and you never *meant* to hurt me; only to prevent my loving you—just as you might have tried to prevent the wave-beats on the shore."

"And all that time the love was growing strong in my own heart," she said. "That was the real struggle all the time, Douglas; to prevent acknowledging to myself how hard it was really to——"

"Hate me. Yes, I know. You have no idea how inexplicable it was to me sometimes. At first it was only amusing; at last—but do not talk of that to-day. Sing to me, Hessie, just the song that you sung to yourself on that morning when I 'earliest met her.' You remember, my queen?"

"Oh, no, Douglas," she cried, hurriedly, "not that—not that to-day!"

"Very well, dear," he answered, gently, "never mind it to-day. But it seems always pleasant to me to think of that Land of the Leel."

After a little pause, she quietly raised her head and sung it, very softly, tears in every sad, sweet line. And when she had finished, she slipped down upon the floor beside him, her beautiful dark eyes wandering out afar among the little fluttering clouds.

"Sad thoughts again?" he asked, tenderly playing with the rich, brown hair; "for yourself, or me?"

"I don't know," she answered, with a little gasp; "for you, I think. This pain and weakness——"

"Are less now, dear one, and only come at times. I wish it had not been to-day; yet this may prevent two days of it a little farther on. Will you sing to me again?"

She tried to clear her voice of its tears.

"Could you follow the hymn with me?" she whispered. "Will you try?"

"Yes."

The clear, sweet notes floated out—floated up, perhaps, into the vast bright dome above. Ay, though they were so very softly sung.

"Douglas," said Hester, kneeling beside him, and looking into his dazzling eyes with a strange, brave comfort, "once, long ago, on the sea-shore, when my heart was restless and angry, you said—the words have lived always clearly in my memory—can you hear me?"

"Yes, plainly, dear one."

The voice was faint, despite its struggle.

"You said:

" 'Far out of sight, while sorrows still infold us,
Lies the fair country where our hearts abide,
And of its bliss is naught more wondrous told us
Than these few words—I shall be satisfied ' "

"Yes, we shall be satisfied," he murmured, looking from her face out across the park to the fathomless blue beyond, and so resting silent for a time, a weary shadow growing in Hester's beautiful, grave eyes.

"Dearest," he whispered, looking again into the struggling face beside him, "how happy we have been! If it is God's will to spare us to each other, how happy we *shall* be! But He knows—what is best. Raise my head a little and—kiss me. I dare not see the pain and love upon your face, my cherished one; it is so dear to me—so dear! It has been such a light upon my way—for this happy time. A little higher; the pain is not great, my darling—and round us both are—the Everlasting arms.

"Hessie"—the whisper was but faint now—"help me in the thought of what *you* may have to bear. Read to me His own words—'Let not your heart be troubled.'"

Her eyes were bent closely over the Book, and her low voice struggled to be calm and clear, as she read the Saviour's wondrous words of comfort. But at last the brave little head fell, and quick tears gushed from the overburdened heart—

although it *was* told not to be troubled—falling in showers on the hot hand she held between her own.

“Have you been in, Tom?” asked Mr. Bruce, joining him as he stood motionless beside the closed door.

“I am just going,” said Tom, softly; “I think he must be asleep. I never before felt so unwilling to disturb them. I feel as if they needed nothing but each other.”

“They are always glad to see you, dear fellow. Come, here is Dr. Thurtees coming in, too.”

They entered the silent room together. They saw the dark head motionless upon the pillows; they saw the kneeling figure, of which nothing was visible save the soft, back folds of the velvet dress, and the rich hair which fell over it; but they heard no sound and saw no movement. Dr. Thurtees walked swiftly to the couch, in evident alarm; then, with one glance, went to prepare a restorative.

“Hessie, Hessie,” cried Tom, in a low voice of intense pain, “look up!”

But she never raised her face from the hand that was elapsing within her own. Her uncle lifted her head gently.

“Uncle,” she whispered, with wide, desolate eyes, “it is all dark unless I stay here. Oh, Tom, don’t take me away!”

Tom take her away!

Tom was on his knees beside her, pleading earnestly and penitently for the gift of this one valued life.

CHAPTER XLIX.

“BY A DEAR, DEAR NAME.”

THE bright, uncertain November sunshine lingered round the peaceful old gray church at Ruyglen; and, peeping in under the heavy porch, laughed over the unusually gay apparel and the eager expectation of Mrs. Delahoyde and the three elderly ladies who stood there with her. Then it ran with a perfect gladness along the green churchyard; out into the smooth highway, where larger groups stood in more noisy anticipation.

High over the open gate there stretched an arch of spotless white flowers; while down below, across the village street, there hung one broad festoon of every imaginable color; and from its centre a blue silk banner waved, proclaiming “Health and Happiness to Brides and Bridegrooms!”

Every man, woman and child in Ruyglen had a holiday to-day; for on this bright November morning Hugh Delahoyde was to perform a double wedding, "assisted by" no one but his own curate; for Mr. Bruce had quietly but very decidedly negatived Bella's proposed plan for requesting the assistance of one or two distant connections of Edward Hemming's, who were either on the Bench, or rapidly advancing toward it.

As guests, Mr. Bruce said, he should be very glad to see them, but there was no occasion at all for the officiation of strangers.

And Bella muttered her discontent to Miss Hemming and Lydia, but did not attempt to argue with her step-father, who, as she knew, had been thoroughly in earnest when he said that his two daughters should be married on the same day, at their own church, and by their own clergyman.

Hester knew that in this decision he was following out Lord Leaholme's wish as well as his own. That he was trying in everything to act and arrange as he fancied the earl would have done had he been able to take his own part in superintendence and direction.

At first Bella feared she should have to delay her own marriage in consequence of this new freak, as she called it; but there had been no occasion, for Lord Leaholme was to spend the winter in the South, and Hester would not hear of his going without her, herself entreating that the day should not be delayed, that they might go as soon as possible.

"But Hester," Leaholme had said, anxiously awaiting her reply, "I wish you would think of it selfishly for a minute. Can you, sweet?—and tell me if—maimed as I am——"

"You dread the trouble, I see, Douglas," she had answered, interrupting him quickly, and trying to bring a reproachful look into her loving eyes. "Well, we will put it off for a few years."

And while he stroked her bright head, with a wondrously tender smile and touch, she went on softly:

"Even in the old stubborn days I felt a little proud (though quite against my will, of course) of your medals, and honors, and—titles. Douglas, there is only one thing I am prouder of, and that is this," and she touched the helpless arm which rested in its sling. "Oh! Douglas, when is your rest from pain to come?"

"One pain is over now forever, dearest."

So they were to be married, too, on this last Thursday in

November; and the crowds on either side the great white archway said there had never been such a show as this before in all the country round.

Of flowers there certainly never had. The brides walked over them, and under them; and, to Hester's happy, bewildered eyes, they seemed to dance about her and caress her like greetings. According to accepted notions, she ought to have seen nothing but the one form beside her, but she *did* see a great many things.

She saw her uncle's loving eyes upon her—so like her father's then, that she almost fancied he himself was there with a blessing for his child. She saw Mrs. Bruce, graceful and magnificent in green moire and point lace. She saw the little boys in their rich velvet suits and silk stockings—Wattie serious and wondering; Alfie critical and mischievous. She saw Bella, gay and pretty in her glistening satin and bridal lace. She saw Mr. Hemming, scrupulous in attire, flushed and nervous. She saw Tom, handsome and well-dressed as in the old time, but earnestly and thoughtfully helping and watching all. She saw a vista of white, girlish figures, with black forms scattered here and there among them.

Still farther away, she saw a medley of bright bonnets and bare heads, reaching on into another crowd, a crowd of shining, glowing faces. Not only men and maidens, young men and children, but old women, too, and these not in the smallest number. And every one was in holiday dress; and every man had a flower in his button-hole, and every girl had a flower in her breast; for the great conservatories at the abbey were thrown open, and the gardeners gave the flowers as they chose.

Hester, passing through this crowd, knew that the smiles which greeted her, and the low blessings which she overheard, were given her for her husband's sake; and, feeling this, and valuing them the more, perhaps, for the knowledge, she looked up shyly into his face—looked up to meet the half-proud, half-humble look which she had seen in his eyes just once before, and below it all some deep and quiet joy which she had *never* seen, she knew, before this day. And Hester found she could not look up again, and walked on upon her husband's arm, listening to the glorious "Wedding March."

"Pollie," said Hugh, to his excited little wife, as they stood at the rectory windows to watch for the carriages on

their way to the station, "I fear I made sad blunders in the service to-day."

"You read it just as you ought to have read it," Pollie answered promptly, "but I didn't listen much. I was looking about me, I'm afraid. Wasn't it all pretty?"

"I hardly know, dear," returned Hugh, thoughtfully. "I did not care to look at—many of them, and it made my voice falter to look at those I did care to see."

"You mean those two?" asked Pollie, softly.

"Yes, dear; because I could not help remembering what they had done for you and me. Look at the life from which he had rescued me a year ago! Look how he encouraged and helped me when I was almost too shy to seek you, love! Then think how I was living, hard, and cold, and unforgiving, when she brought me to you, and let me win your pardon without knowing what cause I had for shame, in my suspicion and credulity! Was it a wonderful thing, dear, as I made them husband and wife, my voice should shake a little?"

"No: no wonderful thing at all, Hugh; and how beautiful she looked!" continued Pollie, who could not settle her thoughts upon anything but what her eyes had taken in to-day.

"Do you know, I was quite afraid," began Hugh, presently, "that Sir Randal Platt would have been there to-day."

"Nonsense, Hugh! Mr. Lane told me he dared not show his face in Herefordshire; hardly in England. I wish he could have been. To see the happiness of this day would have been a rich punishment for him."

Hugh laughed.

"Such men scarcely feel such punishments, dear. Yet, as far as we could see, he did love Miss Bruce—or admire her, or whatever you call it—with all the heart and eyes he possessed; and the losing of her may be a severe punishment to him. We do not know, and most probably never shall. Villains do not always come to tragic or untimely ends in real life, dear."

"I do not wish it, Hugh," said Pollie, earnestly. "You never thought I did, surely. Mother," she added, suddenly, "come and sit here. You can see all down the road from here. They will not be late, you know, because they want to be at Leaholme Castle before night-fall, for the

earl's sake. Not that they will manage it, I think—will they, Hugh?"

"They can be in before late, dear. They will go through without stopping once; the special train is in now, waiting for them; and it isn't a long drive on from Birmingham, as you know."

"Mother, do you remember with what intense awe we used to look at the castle when we caught sight of it? I am glad now that we never went over it in those days. Is it very beautiful inside, Hugh?"

"It seemed so to me. It will seem doubly so to Lord Leaholme to-day."

"Hessie said they were only to stay there one day," continued Pollie, "and then they go southward at once, journeying in easy stages. Of course Mr. and Mrs. Hemming will come first," added Pollie, from her station of observation, "as they go to London by the three o'clock train. Do you know, Hugh, that Miss Lane has never spoken to Hessie since she heard of her engagement to Lord Leaholme—never once, and living in the same house?"

"Pollie," interposed Hugh, gravely, "I do believe Aunt Phyllis has a design in her head. Look! is not that a slipper sticking out of her pocket?"

Pollie laughed, but would not turn from the window.

"Please don't take baby, aunt," entreated Hugh, merrily, "or you may mistake him for the slipper, and the throw would not be attended with such luck."

"Miss Berrington," said Pollie, gently turning to the old lady who sat near her, looking out silently over her gold spectacles, "did you see Hessie's glad surprise when she saw you in our pew to-day? I think it was just the unexpected pleasure to her that we fancied it would be. Hugh," she broke off, "Hugh, I hear the wheels, I think."

But Pollie had so often fancied she heard them, that no one was astonished when this proved a fancy too; and they still waited and watched, while the bells rang out their crashing, joyous peal.

CHAPTER L.

THROUGH THE CROWD.

At Churleigh the wedding party had gathered in clusters out upon the terrace. Some of the good-byes were said. Some had to be given yet. A carriage, packed high with traveling-boxes, drew up to the door, and the servants put in cloaks and coats and rugs. Bella's rosy face popped in and out among the crowd, giving and receiving numberless parting words and kisses. Mr. Hemming made many a hand ache in his grasp, and bestowed upon the merry group of bridesmaids many a harmless compliment. James closed the carriage door with an unusual bow. Bella nodded through the window. Hervey, appreciating his position, pulled in the grays a little, and let them step daintily down the avenue. Out of sight at last, and Churleigh had lost one of its daughters.

As the great luxurious traveling-carriage from Wye rolled down from the yard, and turned upon the sweep, Leaholme grasped Tom's hand. "Remember your promise, dear old fellow. Let Hessie have you with her whenever you can. As for myself, I shall always be looking for my dear old nurse and companion."

"I only wonder how you are to prevent my coming too often," said Tom, his bright eyes rather dim.

"By telling you when you do it," replied Hester, giving him her hand as Leaholme passed on. "So you will be sure to know when you *do* come too often. This is but a short good-bye, dear Tom."

"Hessie, dear, the light that would have been the light of my life will burn clearer in another atmosphere, I know. But I cannot shut myself from it, so—yes, I shall come as often as I can. Leaholme says I shall have many friends up there, helping me to support Government," added poor Tom, with a forced gayety, "but I shall always keep the warmest place in my heart for the two who have taught me what real friends *can* be. Hessie, what will Churleigh be without you? But that's a selfish idea," he added, quickly; "I ought to think what Leaholme's home will be *with* you. And, after all, we shall do quite famously here, dear. The boys are such

sociable little fellows; and now that mother has lost Bella, she will be a truer companion to her husband. Oh, we shall be quite a jovial household presently. Farewell, my little good angel!"

But now Hester could not distinguish the happy faces, and was glad to hide her wet eyes and quivering face in the great closed carriage. It, too, rolled down the avenue, out into the frosty road; and Churleigh had lost both its daughters.

Leaholme drew her to his heart. "No more partings, oh, my love, that can embitter life for me. Give me one kiss, sweetheart, that I may know we are not traveling through an old, old dreamland I once knew. You have not given me one for many days."

"But you have, Douglas."

"That is nothing," he said, a wondrous content in his voice; "I cannot help myself, and I should like you to be weak, too."

Her lips went up to meet his, in one timid kiss, but that did not satisfy him.

"You know what your uncle decided," he said, laughing into her blushing face. "Leaholme never does exactly the thing you expect. Listen, darling! What a perfect clash of joy! I always knew it was the gayest peal in Herefordshire, and this is the gayest chime it ever rang. Why, Hessie, there they are at the open windows of the rectory! Everybody, I declare. And now they are coming down the lawn to meet us. Dear, we must stop for this greeting. True friends are these, to both of us."

Pollie, regardless of the cold wind, or of her new wedding silk dragging the gravel, darted down to the gate; but she had nothing to say when she got there; she only seized Hester's hand, and looked at her with a face full of unspoken words. The elder ladies, with the ribbons of their new wedding-caps flying all in one direction, followed her; and Lord Leaholme left his seat and stood among them; while Aunt Phyllis put both her fluttering hands into the left one that he gave her, and burst into an irrepressible little attack of hysterics.

Such a good-bye it was! Years afterward Pollie used to describe it to her children, so proudly yet so tenderly, that they never knew whether to laugh or cry.

"Think of us at your New-Year's party, please, Mrs. Goldsmith," said Leaholme, as he took his seat again, "and you

must make up your mind to invite us to the next, or we may come in unawares, as Delahoyde and I did last year. Delahoyde, dear fellow, God has been good to us both since then."

"He has sent me many blessings," said Hugh, reverently, "but none greater than your friendship, dear my lord."

"Hessie," said Leaholme, as they drove on—Aunt Phyllis's small shoe falling fortunately a long way short of the stately man and maid who sat at the back of the carriage, but seen and appreciated by Brandt, who turned round from his seat on the box, and acknowledged it with a courteous bow—"Hessie, it must be true that the sorrows of our lives are mostly blessings in disguise. That happy little wife is nearer to her husband now, even than she was before."

But Hester could not answer, for they had met with another interruption, a greater and more serious one this time. The village street was lined and crowded with eager watchers, and the carriage came to a sudden stop.

"I have promised to tell you, my lord," said Mr. Newling, coming up on horseback, and leaning bare-headed to the window, "that your people—though they do not expect or wish you to speak to them now—wish to tell you how they look forward to your return in health again; and wish to show to you, before you leave, their gratitude—the only return, they say, that they can give for all your lordship does for them. And they wish me, too," he added, his bow a little lower, "to give their humble greeting to their lady."

"Thank you," returned Hester, with a bright blush, as she leaned forward and gave the agent her hand, in her pretty girlish simplicity. "Please thank them for me."

"Tell them I could not have had a pleasanter message as a good-bye, will you, Newling?" said Leaholme, quietly; "and tell them this day is always to be a holiday among them. And through the winter, Newling, you will care for them all. I know there is no need to remind you of this. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, my lord. I will remember all."

Mr. Newling sat still bare-headed on his horse, as the carriage went on toward the station; and the people, who had so thoughtfully held back, clustered round him for their master's message.

"I don't like the look of his face yet," he muttered, as the bells vibrated over his head; "I wonder whether it will ever

have the old look again. Well, he has his wish at last. I always prophesied this; for she's the only lady I ever saw who was quite the sort for him. What a picture her face was, when I gave him his tenants' message."

CHAPTER LI.

IN THE FIRE-LIGHT.

IN the early darkness of the winter evening, the Leanolme bells pealed merrily across the frosty landscape; and here, too, the people came out into the road to watch the return of their master with his bride—to watch only, though; for Brandt had peremptorily forbidden the horses being taken out of the carriage, or any noisy demonstration made, and his orders were thoughtfully obeyed. But they watched with a great deal of curiosity here; for the people of Leaholme had not seen the earl since the spring, and he had been wounded and ill since then; and then his bride they had not seen at all. Rather slowly the carriage drove through the town, but without stopping; and there rose one long, glad cheer from a hundred voices. In the faint lamp-light, some quick eyes caught sight of the bright little face at the earl's side, and another cheer followed, as hearty, if not quite so loud.

"For the countess! Do you hear, my darling?" he asked, smiling into her astonished eyes. "How they will love my little countess soon!"

"Hush, Douglas, don't call me that."

"It hurts your pride to fall so rapidly from a queen to a countess, does it, darling? I will make an effort to remember. Here we are at home! Sweet, this is Leaholme."

But Hester's eyes took in little of the castle; they saw nothing but the surprised looks the servants cast into their master's face, as he walked through them with her.

Alone in the beautiful drawing-rooms, Hester stood before one of the fires very silent, trying to banish this one sad thought before he should join her. But only a few minutes had she stood thus, when he came up (in the quietness and the rich, softened light), and drew the dainty white figure into his arms.

"Alone together at last, my queen—alone, and at home. How cleverly you tried to escape me after dinner! But it is

too late ever to hope to escape now. Hessie, are you glad we are at home?"

"Yes."

He looked down quickly into her thoughtful face, and his eyes filled with indescribable tenderness.

"Yes; I see you are glad, dearest."

"I feel very small in this large place, Douglas; but it *does* feel exactly like home—I suppose, because it is your home, and tells me many things of you."

He drew her closer.

"Love, look straight into my eyes. Do I look restless now?"

"Restless? No; why, Douglas?"

"Because when you spoke to me first you unconsciously rebuked me for doing so. Dearest, I am satisfied at last."

"Why do you remember those things?" she asked, with a quick, frightened look into his face.

"Because I knew it was so true. Unsatisfied I always was; little deserving the rest I have found at last."

"Oh, Douglas, the things I said to you then could never have been true, because it was not really you I spoke of, but some one I—I used to think you were."

"They often fitted me rather painfully, especially that one. Is there peace upon my face at last, sweet?"

She was still looking into his eyes, and the love that deepened and gladdened them looked back at him through hers.

"Well, darling wife?"

"It is—it is not a sad face to-day."

"It must be a very, very happy one, I think. Hessie, will you tell me what you were thinking of as you stood here forgetting me entirely, and—fancying I had forgotten you?"

"I was wondering—I think—only wondering," she answered, slowly, "what my life would have been if God had not given you to me at the last, and——"

"And then?"

"Oh, one's thoughts go wandering into all sorts of labyrinths sometimes, you know," she said, very quickly. "Where are yours now?"

"I was wondering—I think—only wondering," he mimicked, gayly, "if my wife could ever really know how precious she is to me."

"Yes, she knows, Douglas," the sweet voice answered, brightly; "because she knows how kindly you judge her."

Whereas, all the same she knows she is but a—would it be ludicrous to quote Shakespeare on such a subject?"

"Very—the subject being so insignificant. But have you found a portrait of yourself?"

"Yes, in Portia; for I am 'Happy in this, I am not yet so old but I may learn; and happier than this, I am not bred so dull but I can learn. Happiest of all in that my spirit commits itself to yours to be directed.'"

"Never leave words out when you quote, please. It is 'gentle spirit.'"

"Oh, I hope it is," she answered, earnestly. "It should be Douglas."

"Hessie," said Leaholme, turning away his eyes involuntarily, as she looked up with such a world of brave and tender love in the young face, "I know into what labyrinth those thoughts had wandered when I came in. My cherished wife, the life that seems to lie so bright before us is not all. In the longer, brighter one that follows shall we not be together still? My darling knows and feels this in her faith and trust?"

"Oh, Douglas," she cried, "they all say that this winter in the south will make you strong again."

"May do so, dear," he answered, softly, laying the troubled face against his own, "and I feel content. I was much stronger and healthier in the old days than—than most men; and their strength has been taken from me only when a great happiness came to take its place. It almost seems as if it would be too much to have both; and yet every day I think I feel the old strength coming slowly back. I do, indeed, my cherished little nurse; and you yourself will see how rapidly it follows in our happy footsteps."

"I know you would not tell me this unless you really felt it, Douglas," she whispered, looking into his face, with her eyes full of perfect and complete trust. "You could not speak untruthfully, even to make me happy. For me, your face has just its old, old look, even now."

She had her hands clasped around his arm, and he bent and kissed, again and again, the earnest little lips.

"Hessie," he said, presently, with a bright change in his voice, "I am going to sing to you; but you must be content with a base accompaniment only, for I will not be indebted to you for this one, as it requires a skill which you cannot be expected to possess. I am going to sing the song I sung

you on that first day when you nipped me so very persistently and scornfully."

"You never sung a song to me, Douglas."

"I never sung or played to any one else, when you were present. Did you not understand that, my queen?"

"I suppose I would not understand. I will when you play to me again. What happy music we have had to-day, Douglas!"

She sat upon the rug, looking laughingly back at him as he played a few bars of the "Wedding March" with one hand. But gradually her eyes went back to the ruddy coals, and she sat quite still and motionless, listening with full heart as he began the air she had heard for the first time on the day when she first saw him—and had never heard since. That night came back to her vividly, in a wondrous contrast to this; and all the doubt and sorrow of the months between melted and vanished in the glad content which filled her heart, and lent a new, strange power to every note to which she listened:

" 'On a summer day did I earliest meet her,
I know all the words that she first did say;
By a dear, dear name I have learned to greet her—
I knew not then, but 'tis come to-day.
With this self-same fire-light shining upon her,
Streaming down on her ringlets' sheen,
She is sitting near me. She whom I honor,
She that I waited for, my queen.

" 'I never dreamed of her tall and stately,
She that I love is so fairy light;
I cannot picture her walk sedately,
Yet whatever she does is sure to be right.
And I found her courteous, I found her holy,
Pure in her spirit, that maiden I love;
Whether her birth had been noble or lowly,
I cared no more than the spirit above.
And I've given my heart to my lady's keeping,
And ever her strength on mine shall lean,
And the stars shall fall and the angels be weeping,
Ere I cease to love her, my queen.

There, Hester Arundel. The words of that song are copy-right. Do you fully comprehend?" asked the earl, turning gravely on his seat, and looking rather inquisitively into Hester's half-hidden face.

No ready answer came.

"What did you say?"

"I did not speak, Douglas."

"Oh, you were going to do so, I suppose?"

"No. Why?"

"I am expecting a reply—or an encore."

He had left the piano then, and was leaning against the chimney-piece, looking down upon her, while she still kept her face half-hidden.

There was a few minutes' silence, then he laid his left hand on her bent head.

"Dear one, look up, and give me an answer to my song."

She took the caressing hand in hers, and laid her cheek upon it, but she did not even then look up as she spoke.

"I don't think, Douglas, that the stars—will ever fall—nor that the angels—will ever be weeping."

"Nor that——? Go on my dearest."

"Nor that—you will ever cease to love me."

"One thing more, my wife. Nor that——?"

"Nor that—I *can* ever cease to love you."

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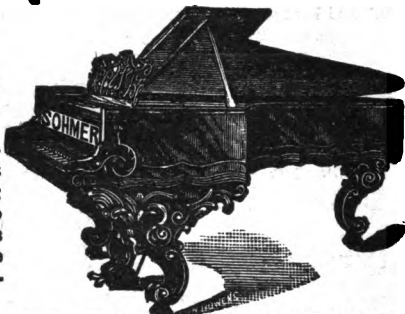
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